

THE PRESIDENT DIED AT NOON

Books by George Borodin

RED SURGEON

BASTARD ANGELS

VISIONS OF CONTEMPT

STREET OF A THOUSAND MISTERS

THIS RUSSIAN LAND

PEACE IN NOBODY'S TIME

SOVIET AND TSARIST SIBERIA

THOSE BORGAS

The President Died at Noon

GEORGE BORODIN



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PROLOGUE

IT MAY puzzle you, reader, as to why I am writing the prologue to this book by George Borodin; but just how my story ties up with his, he himself is going to relate. As he loves scribbling I will let him have his fun!

Years ago it would have cost me an effort to lay bare to the world my secret, but to-day I view the whole thing dispassionately. Thus do we change. The catastrophic tragedy of the moment, the all-consuming emotion of to-day, becomes in a little while just one of the patches of colour, a little faded and dusty, in the painted backcloth of one's life. And as I recounted the story to Borodin, I smiled at the thought of the heartache and horror I felt in those distant days when the very name of Algiers was mentioned in my hearing.

But let me begin at the beginning. Perhaps I should first describe myself as I was those many years ago when I studied medicine in Paris. Very poor, of course, but then, what student is not? A prosperous student would seem an almost indecent being! Very conscientious, with hopes and dreams of setting the world afire with my medical discoveries, and consumed with the desire to heal suffering humanity. Very impressionable, enduring the heartaches that are the companions of this quality.

Then I fell in love with Jeanne Vignois. She was a waitress in a little café which I visited regularly. It was not a very palatial place, but Jeanne's presence made up to me in double measure what the café lacked in finery. Who cared about snowy napery and shining cutlery when Jeanne's blue-black eyes smiled at one as the owner's lovely, if work-scarred hands placed the rather unappetising food upon the table.

I felt that she liked me too, like the essential Englishness in me, and my rather immature adoration. Let me admit it—I was at the age where women represented everything that was lovely and ethereal; to me they were born to be worshipped. Probably I felt this way because it was spring, I was in Paris and I was in love!

One hot and clammy day, a day that was probably to change the course of my life, I went to the café for my humble meal.

There was poor Jeanne, tired and weary, standing around waiting for the evening's customers, when she must once again rush from table to table carrying greasy food from one grinning lout to another.

"Jeanne," I whispered as she passed my table, "how would you like to get away from this place for a time—to some—some quiet and lovely spot where the only food you'll see will be served to you by attentive waiters." I remember feeling very pleased with myself as I spoke those words—the knight on the white charger coming to the rescue of the little beggar maid!

Jeanne laughed—it was a short and rather scornful laugh, but it was like tinkling bells in my ears at that time.

"And when will that be, cherié?" she asked, looking at my very shiny suit, the sleeves of which were beginning to get a little short for me.

"Leave it to me," I answered stoutly, and there and then I swore to myself that Jeanne and I would indeed go to 'some quiet and lovely spot,' come what may.

However, the next few weeks took away some of my exaltation. I scrimped and saved and counted every sou I spent on my frugal living, and my mind, which, up to that time had been absorbed by medicine, became obsessed by thoughts of Jeanne, warm moonlit nights and the two of us alone. . . .

Then one day I proudly strode into the travel-agency and bought two tickets for a five-day cruise on the good ship *Serin*, whose owners promised untold pleasures and diversions on the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

Now normally I prefer an evening with my microscope to any amount of rushing hither and thither on the face of the globe. There are far more exciting adventures for me in the microcosmos than in the macrocosmos, although I suppose the avid globe-trotter, the man with a morbid appetite for sights and sounds, and smells of surpassing strangeness will no doubt set all this down against me in particular and cruise patrons in general. Thus a young man with his first love! With my books and laboratory tucked away to the back of my mind, I was ready to undertake a journey to Mars on a Wellsian rocket

for Jeannel! But all she wanted was a trip on the *Serin*—she liked the pictures of the ship, she insisted, and her wish was my command.

When I saw her, I found that the good ship *Serin* hardly lived up to her name; but Charon's boat took people to the shores of the Elysian fields, and the *Serin*, for all her snub-nose—I suppose I should say 'bluff bows'—and tub-like sides was to be my paradise for five whole days.

That journey to Algiers was heaven and hell for me. Heaven because I had Jeanne near me, and hell because her very presence only tormented me further. She was not now the little waitress of the café, but a very capricious young woman with ideas of her own as to how she should spend her time. But, dear reader, as I said before, I was young, I loved madly, and my only thought was to please Jeanne and obey her every whim. Who shall say youthful love is weakness? It may be that this all-consuming passion makes us utterly unselfish for the first and only time in our lives; makes us completely efface all thoughts of self. Perhaps this first love is the only one that really leaves its mark on us down the years. . . . And that is why heaven crept into my hell during that voyage to Algiers.

Algiers!—full of the glamour of the East, so the travel-agency said, but common sense and a reliable atlas informed me that it was some little distance west of Marseilles from which I sailed. Algiers to me was just a point on a five-day itinerary.

When we arrived the thought of visiting this place so famed by visitors did not thrill me in the least. I did not care a jot for Algiers or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon themselves, so long as I was with Jeanne, and now, I thought, I would be able to have her alone, away from those boat bores. We would wander about the streets in perfect companionship, and I would tell her of my love, perhaps chase away the mocking gleam in her eyes and bring a tender smile to them—a smile for me alone.

But alas, when we did arrive Jeanne had retired to her cabin, and no persuasion from me could woo her out. She was tired; and in her most charming and wheedling voice she begged me to go alone—to enjoy myself, and to come back to her in the

evening. Her voice was unexpectedly loving and full of promise, and seemed to say she would be waiting for my return, ready to make up for her former caprices.

And so, poor fool that I was, I started down the gang-plank feeling happy for the first time since the start of the trip—ready to enjoy my day, but already longing for the moment when I would return to a rested and repentant Jeanne, who would from now on bestow on me all the warmth and affection she had hitherto withheld.

I made up my mind that the autobuses with their gaily caparisoned couriers would open their doors for me in vain and that the sellers of African curios made by painstaking Birmingham workmen would cry their wares to my deaf ears.

I went on the tender amid the crowd who had suddenly become very distasteful to me. They were, as I now saw, the worst type of French bourgeoisie, and I knew exactly what they would do ashore. Nothing would have induced me to spend eight hours with them passing from autobus to autobus. I firmly shook my head when the courier invited me to take my seat and said I would look after myself. I was not the only one. Algiers, like Marseilles, has its streets. The courier smiled knowingly, and I was left with half a dozen men. The sight of them, and the thought of being classified with them, filled me with nausea. Very, very English nausea, I must admit, but, as I said before, I was extremely English when I lived abroad! And so, as they moved with one accord in a certain direction, I resolutely hurried the opposite way.

And then it happened—how and where I do not know. If you took me to Algiers this minute and led me through street after street, I could not point to the spot and say: "That is where the girl came up to me, that is the house I went into." Algiers, I insist, is just a name to me, a sprawling entity, formless and without detail.

She shot from a house like a grape-pip flipped between finger and thumb. She was white and frightened—I could see that; and I could also see that she was beautiful. Behind her was a coloured man, who was gesticulating wildly and talking in a whining, excited voice.

I stepped forward. I do not know why; it was automatic, for my thoughts were, as usual, with Jeanne.

"Can I help you, mam'selle," I asked.

She stared.

"I am looking for a doctor," she panted in a husky French. "It is urgent. Can you tell me . . ."

And then I did an outrageous thing. As I have mentioned before, I was a student in Paris—to be precise, a second-year medical student. But I had not been long enough on the Continent to shake off my inherent Englishness. I imagined that all Englishmen were better than all foreigners. Therefore, a second-year English medical student was certainly at least as good as a fully-fledged foreign doctor—especially in a place like Algiers.

I smiled self-importantly.

"You are lucky, mam'selle," I said. "I am a doctor."

She gave me a quick look of doubt . . . perhaps my youth did not impress her as evidence of the truth of my words; but she said nothing. She signed to me to follow, and I went into the house.

Inside she turned to me.

"There has been a dreadful accident," she said in a low voice. "I am afraid that . . . but no, you will see for yourself."

She pulled back a curtain across a doorway and pointed. I hesitated, then went in. She did not follow.

It did not look like an accident to me. There was something lying on the floor. It had once been an elderly man, but now it was little more than a blood-stained wreck. There was so much blood that at first I could not decide whether he had been white or brown.

But his features decided me. Yes; he had been white, perhaps German. I could see several knife wounds on his body, which had been very savagely handled. Already I was cursing myself for having asserted so confidently that I was a doctor. Despite my self-conferred status, I was feeling a little sick. I had never seen anything like this before. But I was interested, too. Medical jurisprudence was my passion. That was why I was studying in France instead of England. One

day I hoped to be allowed to work in Locard's laboratory.

I stared at the body, trying to apply what little knowledge I possessed. How had he been attacked? Where had the assailant stood? Were the blows right-handed or left-handed?

There was a sound behind me. I turned to see the girl peeping cautiously into the room. Her eyes held an urgent question.

I smiled as best I could in an effort to reassure her of my competence.

"There is nothing I can do, *mam'selle*," I said; "you need a policeman, not a doctor."

"I have sent for the police," she said. There was something about the way she said it that shocked me. Quickly I looked at her. No; she had not the strength to deliver blows such as these. Yet there was fear—unholy fear in her eyes.

A fussy little French official arrived, and with him a lean man with gold-rimmed pince-nez, who was obviously the police surgeon. He took one look at the body and crinkled his nose, lifting his sloping shoulders in unison with the crinkling.

"Another one," he said resignedly to the official—"typical of these Arab knifings. I have seen them in Egypt, in Tunis, in Morocco. Always they are the same." He shrugged again. "Where one stab would be more than enough, they make six, eight, ten, twelve." He turned to me. "You are a doctor, *m'sieur*?"

"A student," I stammered, "I—I came to see if I could do anything."

"We are always hopeful when we are students," retorted the surgeon.

I relapsed into a rather humble silence.

"Who was he?" asked the surgeon.

The official spread his hands. "His name was Grunholtz. He was one of your colleagues—a doctor. A little mad, I think, which was why he was here. He was harmless, he interfered with no one, so we took no notice of him. He believed he could cure everything."

"Ah," said the doctor, smiling with a cynicism that affronted my student mind. "When we are young, we think we can do

that—like our friend here.” He indicated me: “When we are old, perhaps we think the same. In between, what is it? We behave as though we can cure anything but doubt it.”

What, I wondered, lay behind the cynicism of this police surgeon? What had brought him to Algiers and this dreary work? Maybe some foolhardy action . . . and then I felt a stab of fear for my own medical career which might now be put in jeopardy through my rash boast.

“You are a cynic,” I burst out.

“Every doctor must be. We are wasting time. Let us get on.”

“And you, *mam’selle*, you are his daughter?”

“No.” Her eyes were wide. “I am a friend. I called here and the boy told me to go in. I found—that.”

The official looked at the girl and myself a little sceptically, I thought, then turned to the doctor.

“Doctor, I will leave you to make your examination and full report. I am afraid, *m’sieur*, that you and the young lady must accompany me to Headquarters; there are a few questions to be answered—the usual formalities, you understand.”

“I understand nothing!” I burst out. “I am on a cruise, the boat is stopping here a short time, I must get back to the dock immediately—there is someone on board . . .”

“Do not worry, we will have a message sent to the young lady on your behalf,” and he smiled, with what he thought was great subtlety.

I noticed that the girl said nothing, but stood with fists clenching and unclenching nervously. It seemed that she was bringing all her powers to bear on keeping her feelings under control. Had she been so fond of her ‘friend,’ or was she implicated in this horrible business more deeply than she had admitted?

All this passed through my mind rapidly, because I was struggling for more words to tell the official, for whom I was beginning to feel a great hatred, that I must get away—back to the boat and Jeanne.

“*Mam’selle*, *m’sieur*, this way if you please.”

He led the way to the car which was standing outside the

house; the girl followed rather dazedly in his wake, and I made up an impatient and reluctant third. Well, I thought, there's only one thing to be done—tell them all I know, which was exceedingly little—and get away as quickly as possible. Surely, I argued to myself, when they realize that I was indeed only an innocent passer-by they will release me immediately.

The car stopped outside the Headquarters. Native police ushered us into the office of the Chief of Police, and then began one of a series of interminable interviews—questions and answers flying back and forth, back and forth. The outcome of it all was that the girl and I were being held as witnesses until the doctor had made his full report and more light had been thrown on the case in general and our presence in the house in particular.

I fumed, shouted, wept, stormed, but I was up against French officialdom. They shrugged, they smiled, they regretted the inconvenience caused, but *m'sieur* was an important witness and they were very firm that I should stay. They were sure my young lady would understand, and I could write her a note now to tell her I would only be delayed for two or three days.

Two or three days! It might as well have been two or three years, or centuries! Jeanne was alone on that boat—and her voice had held such promise as she bade me good-bye. . . .

"I shall appeal to the English Consul," I stormed.

"By all means," the official replied, suavely, "but I am sure your so correct English Consul will agree with us that such an important witness as a young doctor who was found on the scene of a ghastly crime should stay to give us all the co-operation in his power."

What could I reply to that? Suddenly I realized that argument would avail me nothing, and I allowed them to lead me off to the small cell-like room that was to be mine for the next few days. The girl was led off in another direction, still silent and still visibly keeping her emotions strictly under control.

"Thank you," she murmured to me, as we parted company at the door.

"I did nothing," I mumbled.

"You stayed by me," she answered, "and I could not have faced those men alone." And for a flash the look of terror suddenly dropped from her eyes and she smiled at me, a lovely smile on a face of great beauty, but it gave place to obvious anxiety again as she was led off down the corridor.

During the next few days my time was spent in cross-examinations, with an occasional hour in the exercise ground under the surveillance of a native policeman, but most of the time I sat alone in that awful little room. My mind was a perfect whirl of horror, plans, hopes. I decided there was nothing I could do until they released me—then I would go straight to Jeanne in Paris, explain everything, beg her pardon and ask her to marry me. Yes, those hours of loneliness had showed me one thing—I really loved her and wanted her to share my rather hazardous future.

Those cross-examinations are rather vague in my mind now, and those horrible days are lumped together as a long series of questions and answers. Sometimes the mysterious girl was present, and sometimes I was alone with my tormentors. When she was there she answered in a low and frightened voice and I always thought she was holding back some information—facts she was terrified to bring to light.

Then came the day of the final examination—at last they were satisfied that I was indeed an innocent passer-by—the apologies for having kept me, and the escorted trip to the docks where there was a ship bound for Marseilles. The fussy little official came to see me off, and to this very day I do not know whether to be grateful or angry with him for the part he played in deciding the course of my life.

Marseilles—the long and tedious train journey to Paris, and then—Jeanne's café. I ran along the street and entered with my heart beating painfully in my throat. How would she greet me—what would be her first words?

I rushed in—she was standing by the counter. I ran up to her.

"Jeanne," I cried, "did you get my message? Let me explain to you what happened. Will you . . ."

A veritable torrent of words poured joyfully from my mouth

—partly, I think, because of the look in her eyes. She was smiling, her mouth was soft and her eyes very loving. Ah, I thought, she understands and forgives!

Then I realized that she was looking beyond me to the door; she walked forward, passing me as if I didn't exist, right into the arms of a young, pimply youth who was standing in the doorway. . . .

I rushed over to them, tried to pull her out of his arms.

"Who are you?" I demanded angrily.

Jeanne answered: "In case it really interests you, Maurice was an officer on that boat—it was so lucky, *mon cher*, for you see, he and I have been friends for a long time."

"Yes, very good friends," echoed the pimply youth, with a grin.

"You mean you knew him before the cruise?" I asked in great surprise.

"But of course! Why then should I have insisted that we sail on that old tub?" queried Jeanne, a malicious smile in her eyes.

Then I threw all caution to the winds—the people in the café, the pimply youth named Maurice, no one mattered but Jeanne and all my plans for our future together.

"Jeanne," I implored, "I came here to explain everything to you—it really wasn't my fault—I want you to—to marry me."

I had said it! The young Englishman had proposed to a little waitress in the café in which she worked, in the hearing of at least a dozen people.

"To marry you?" asked Jeanne, with the amused little twinkle in her eye which I had come to dread. Well, *cherié*, I will ask my fiancé if he approves," and she turned to Maurice.

"Your fiancé?" I almost screamed. "Why you . . ." And before I knew what was happening I had grasped the puny little man by the shoulders and was shaking him like the rat he was. All the discomforts I had endured to take Jeanne on that cruise, all the humiliations I had suffered at her hands during the few days I was on the boat, and all the nightmare of Algiers flooded upon me, and I seemed to be taking vengeance for it all upon the little officer who was Jeanne's friend before we sailed,

and who was now her fiancé. How they must have laughed at the stupid Englishman!

There were screams and cries from the people in the café, and quickly a crowd gathered round, trying to separate us, but I refused to be prized off, and the very weakness of the creature made me the more furious. That he should get Jeanne, when I had made so many plans. . . .

I remember very little of that fight except the desire to kill, a desire which, fortunately, I have only known but once in my life. Then a hand on each shoulder—a gendarme on either side of me.

"You will accompany us to Headquarters," one said quietly, but insistently.

Was I dreaming? Where had I heard those words before? My head was buzzing with fury, chagrin and despair. Ah, yes, it had been a week before in Algiers—the fussy little official. . . .

And so, for the second time, I found myself—a respectable young Englishman—in a police station. Another small cell-like room—more hours of frustration and monotony and a night in which to cool my heels.

In the morning I was brought before the Chief of Police and questioned.

"But why did you attack this young man? What had he done to you?"

I shook my head dejectedly.

"He . . . he just took away my girl, that's all. I was very foolish and I apologize."

That night in the cell and those days in Algiers had taught me many things about French police, and one was that arguing with them gets you nowhere.

"He stole your girl, did he? Well, perhaps I can understand how you felt over that," and the Frenchman smiled. "But, m'sieur, maybe you were a little hasty, and I feel sure that this young man will make a—shall we say—more suitable husband for the young lady in question. I understand she is very very French, you know." (Or did he mean I was very very English, I wondered.) "And now, since your Professor from the college

is here to speak for you, you may go, but remember, don't come back again, because the next time . . . ”

But I did not wait to hear what dire fate awaited me if I appeared before the police again. I walked out of the station, into the street. It seemed that everyone was looking at me, whispering, jibing at me because I had just spent a night in a cell in Paris; and maybe they even knew I had been days in a cell in Algiers. I crept along to my room, wondering if I could ever forget that past week, a week in which I had been embroiled twice with the police. Continental and native police at that—not even honest-to-God English bobbies!

But I did in fact forget all about the affair; and it was not until years afterwards that I recalled it in all its detail. And that is where Borodin comes into the story, or rather, that is where I come into Borodin's story.

I often wonder what would have happened if I had remained on board. There are all sorts of possibilities. I might have stayed in France and worked under Locard after all. I might . . . but no . . . it is better as it is. Even in England they are beginning to take notice of medical jurists, especially when they can say that they have had experience in Algiers!

JOHN CHARTON

Chapter 1

“GRENOUILLE”

SINCE THE whole affair was started by Grenant, undoubtedly the best way to begin is by introducing this odd, and as it proved for me, catastrophic person. It was during my student days in Paris, days that held much more for me than imbibing academic knowledge; and I suppose that the business I am going to relate was actually the most astonishing thing of all that happened to me during those happy years.

To look at, Grenant would hardly have been suspected as a guide-courier to strange and even sinister events. He was a

man of middle years, perhaps forty-five, though somehow one never thought of age in connection with him; one had the impression that the students of fifteen years before had seen him exactly as I did, and that the students of a generation hence would gaze on the same slightly obese figure surmounted by a faint bald patch on the middle of the head, as though he had started to wear a monk's tonsure and then regretted it.

Grenant was a fixture in space, as well as in time. He had, so it appears, been a student all his life. Being a student, he said, was his profession; and there must have been few people so wedded to their professions as he. Everyone, of course, made the obvious joke and likened him to Trigorin, that character of Chekhov's, but no one ever called him Trigorin. No; his nickname was Grenouille, The Frog, because of his pale green eyes that seemed to start from his head and his large, ever-open mouth that held eternally between its puffed lips, like a reed, either a cigarette or a pencil.

Did one want to seek out Grenant, one looked as a matter of course in the Sorbonne. Not that the occasions for seeking him out were many; Grenant was usually forcing himself on one's attention or ferociously ignoring one. Nevertheless, he was usually there either in the lectures or outside reading the notices with the air of a perplexed connoisseur doubtful about the authenticity of an Italian Primitive. His eternal studentship had a touch of the pathetic about it, but it was not without its rewards. He had become a legend in his lifetime; visiting Englishmen and Americans came to see him as they did the Eiffel Tower, the Mona Lisa, or the latest attraction at the Moulin Rouge. My own first contact with him was made by the notice board, when he was weighing the competing attractions of two entirely unrelated series of special lectures by visiting bigwigs.

Everyone, then, knew Grenant; but none knew who he was or where he had come from, or even how he managed to remain a non-earning student for so long. No one cared, really; Grenant was accepted as part and parcel of the daily background. True, his name and accent were unmistakably French and his torrid temperament could be nothing but Latin; but for all that

he did not seem to belong to any one nationality specifically. His habits were quite un-French sometimes, and he had a distinct enthusiasm for American innovations. He had, for example, a passion for hot-dogs, when hot-dogs had not become an international delicacy. He enjoyed them especially when they were paid for by someone else.

Certainly, he was not poor—not really poor, that is, as students go. To be really and conclusively poor in Paris one must conform to a certain pattern. One must live in a garret and possess a shirt that one doesn't change for a whole season, and one must eat five-franc meals sparingly, for one rarely has five francs. That's what Parisian poverty means. Grenant knew nothing of it. He must have had a little money, for I have seen him stuffing bread-rolls into his pouting mouth during the intervals between lectures—and a man who can do things like that must be well off! I sometimes wonder whether he was perhaps the beneficiary of some eccentric will, which condemned him to a life of learning as a condition of a small livelihood. Grenant, I am sure, would never have had the courage to branch off on his own and forego a present stability. A wag, a fellow-student taking physics, once answered a questioner by pointing to Grenant as a definition of inertia.

Grenant was a man of sudden and inexplicable affections. Once he had attached himself to a person he would not let go until his interest waned. There seemed no rhyme nor reason in the way he selected his victims. He would spot the destined protégé and descend on him, offering him notebook or pencil, taking the latter, as a rule, from between his lips. He was helpfulness personified. He knew the times when the best professors were lecturing, and where; he could provide, as it were, an annotated calendar. He knew, too, exactly what each was going to lecture about—even what the great man would have to say. He had heard the same lectures year in, year out, for something like twenty years, but still he persevered in his search for his own private Holy Grail—'the hope of hearing something new.'

This hope, this zealous belief in the discovery of novelty, was something I could not understand. As a third-year student,

I knew there could not be anything very new in substance about the string of scientific facts doled out to us; they just had to be assimilated and that was all. But Grenant persisted in his novelty hunting. And sheer enthusiasm brought its own reward.

If he saw the least variation in method from what he had grown used to—say, in taking out an appendix—he would immediately make a tour of the students’ *bistros* and tell everyone who would listen about the wonderful new discovery of Professor So-and-so. The discovery usually revealed itself to be nothing more than a variation in stitching up an incision—something everyone knew about, except poor Grenouille. For despite his years of sitting at the feet of authority and learning, he was appallingly, devastatingly ignorant—that is, of anything that mattered. He was little more than a walking popular-science magazine. He was full of exciting and startling facts, without any definite scientific corroboration, and he was fond of mistaking analogies for final proofs. His interest began and ended with the gaining of knowledge—any kind of knowledge. In twenty years he had not sat for an examination of any consequence. He would follow nothing to the bitter end. It was never surprising to find him in the obstetrics class when, properly, he should have been at the anatomy lecture, or listening to a discourse on radioactivity when he should have been in the chemical laboratories. His craving for ‘knowledge’ was so great that he would suddenly, without any thought, ‘throw up medicine,’ as he put it, and take up philosophy, which, he would declare, could cure all the ills of mankind. He had these phases of renunciation and metaphysical fervour regularly, so I was told—say once every five years; and he would ask hotly why one should go to the trouble of studying medicine and surgery when Plato and Kant and Schopenhauer could *prevent* your ever needing medical attention at all.

In my time, I think he made this change as the result of reading a pamphlet on Christian Science. It did not last long. A week later he was taking history and psychology concurrently, so that he could ‘diagnose Napoleon’s brain.’ This gave him an opportunity to devise some really startling theories.

Chapter 2

THE MEETING

I HAVE written a lot about Grenant, Grenouille the Frog, not because he himself was a principal player in this drama, but because he was the call-boy of fate. Besides, it is rather important that his particular and peculiar attitude to life should be understood. The Grenouille I have described did not spring to the mind as I have sketched him; on the contrary, it took a long time to get to know all his little vagaries and to know how to handle his plans and suggestions. I had known him sufficiently long to have become sceptical when he first told me about Dr. Vardarma. He had talked for a solid twenty minutes, his prominent eyes wider than ever, and his mouth gaping more and more as he proceeded.

"*Tiens!*" I said at last, just to show that I, too, had the power of speech. "You don't say so."

But he did say so, and he insisted on it. "I do say so. I do. A man doesn't find a cure for cancer every day of his life. And I tell you, this fellow has something. I know it. I can prove it."

I turned a cold, discouraging eye on him, but it did not calm him. He was wildly excited, and he began a furious assault on the piece of ice lying at the bottom of his aperitif glass. There was silence for a little while. Grenant had caught the ice and was sucking it; and an ice cube, even half melted, is not an aid to conversation. Not even he could overcome the physical difficulties it created.

I studied him closely. There was something pathetic about his enthusiasm, which contrasted so oddly with the bald patch on his head. I was at a loss to understand how a man could have listened to so many lectures and retained the gullibility of a freshman. I softened a little.

"Listen, Grenouille," I said, not unkindly. "I'm awfully glad your Dr. Vardarma, whoever he is, has discovered a cure for cancer. I hope he gets the Nobel Prize. I hope you get it, too, as the discoverer of a discoverer. But I'm busy this afternoon. I have a rendezvous with Fate. She's beautiful, and

I'm interested, and no sort of cancer cure in the whole world is going to keep me away from her. You can tell me all about it on Monday." (It was a rash promise, but I made it knowingly.) "That is, unless you've discovered something else more important by then."

"But, Borodin, I assure you! I know it! I . . ."

I held up my hand. "You assured me about the 'startling discovery' that radium could be made by mixing lead and sulphuric acid and bombarding the mixture with the nucleus of a hydrogen atom—remember? You assured me that a 'startling discovery' had been made in plastic surgery; all you had to do was to melt the bones by means of a high-frequency current so that the surgeon could mould them into any desired shape as a sculptor works clay. You assured me that you yourself, with your own eyes, had witnessed the creation of life from inanimate matter, although if I remember aright you were not quite sure of the actual details, and you didn't know whether your discoverer had produced a virus or an amoeba. You must admit, Grenouille, that I have listened patiently to your assurances and startling discoveries. I don't take it to myself for virtue; I enjoy it. I shall go on listening to them. But not on Saturdays. On any other day of the week—yes; but on Saturdays, and this Saturday particularly, most decidedly no. You see, my poor Frog, I am out to make a discovery for myself."

"Really?" His eyes nearly burst from his head. "What is it?"

"I want to test the female heart. I want to see whether a certain woman is exceptional or merely ordinary. I want to discover whether she is clever or merely pretending to me. That's to be my startling discovery."

Grenouille's face fell. "Women!" he exclaimed, curling his thick lips. "Bah! Of what scientific interest can they be to a man of your attainments? They are an illusion."

"Precisely. That's what I want to make sure of this afternoon. Meet me here to-morrow at the same time, and I'll tell you whether you are speaking correctly or whether woman is one of those microbes that defy the microscope . . ."

Grenant, I regret to say, was paying no attention to my flight. His mind had been travelling on along its own private road.

"That's it, Borodin; that's it," he said excitedly. "They absolutely defy the microscope. That's what they do. Up till now, that is. But Vardarma has found them out. He's seen them—actually and positively seen them!"

"Oh, hell!" I retorted in exasperation. "Leave me alone, Grenouille, and go and play with your Dr. Vardarma. Who's ever heard of him, anyway?"

It was an easy opening; and Grenant was not man enough not to take advantage of it.

"Who'd ever heard of Pasteur, Lister, Mendelieff, the Curies—until they had done something to talk about?" He had an air of smug triumph. He was vastly delighted with himself. "See what I mean?" he added, with an air of consciously giving the *coup de grace*.

"Yes," I replied bitterly. "I see. But I'm still waiting for facts before I get enthusiastic."

"I've given you facts," he protested. "Haven't I told you he's isolated the cancer germ?"

"What of it?" I was weary of the whole business. "Fibiger also thought he'd found the germ—and what happened to Fibiger?"

Grenouille did not answer. He plainly did not know. Twenty years of listening to lectures had not taught him as much as that.

"Turn up a textbook on Fibiger and find out," I went on, determined, in my turn, to have a triumph. "Then you'll see what a rosy path is open to these cancer discoverers."

Grenant promised almost too meekly that he would do so. He seemed resigned now to the fact that I was not particularly responsive to his plea that I should visit Dr. Vardarma. He rose abruptly, muttering something about being busy—though whether he or I or the mysterious doctor was concerned, I did not gather—and said he must go. Suddenly, however, he bent over my copy of the *Paris-Soir* and scribbled something rapidly in the white margin. He replaced the pencil between his lips.

"The best men in Paris are going to be there," he insisted, as a last appeal. "I might have known you would laugh at my discovery." (It always came to that. Grenant discovered discoveries, and their discoveries became his—for a time.) "But the greatest scientists in France will be at Vardarma's demonstration this afternoon. They're all laughing at him, and they hope he'll make a fool of himself, just like you do. But Vardarma's challenged them, and he'll show them." An ineffable look of ecstasy glowed in those pale green eyes. "You ought to come—just to join in the laugh. Why don't you, Borodin? There's the address in case you can manage it." He pointed to the scrawl on the margin of my newspaper.

I patted him on the shoulder. "You're a decent bloke," I said affectionately, "and I'm going to give you some good advice—which you won't take, of course. Don't take these 'startling discoveries' too seriously, or you'll qualify as a witch-doctor. But I promise this—if I do get a moment, I'll drop in."

This reply seemed to mollify him. He pulled down his soiled, shiny coat, and, with a flutter of the hand, bade me good-bye—but not without a parting shot.

"Heathen!" he murmured. "That's what you Russians are—heathens!"

I watched him go and did not know whether to laugh at him or feel sorry for him. Cancer cure, indeed! A newspaper man I knew had told me his office had an average of half a dozen a month brought to its notice; and most of their sponsors were either get-rich-quick quacks or men who subsequently had to be certified. I wondered to which class Grenant's Vardarma belonged.

Still wondering, I glanced at the clock on Saint Supplice and saw that time was getting on, so I tossed a coin beneath my aperitif glass and set out for my assignation.

Chapter 3

CHEZ GEORGES

MY DESTINATION was Chez Georges, a little restaurant opposite the back of the Academy, where I had arranged to meet Nada. I knew, of course, that she would be late, so I secured a small table near the door in order that I might see her as soon as she finally arrived.

Chez Georges—I wonder if it still exists?—had a lobster salad that was famous. The denizens of the Quartier des Beaux Arts knew it well. It was cheap and tasty, and with a little white wine comprised a most appetizing lunch. It was not often one could feed so delectably for so little. Eating this lobster salad and sipping white wine had grown to be quite a regular Saturday arrangement for Nada and I; as had making love over the coffee that followed.

Nada has little enough to do with the main story. Her history is long and complicate, and she is best forgotten. But she is important in that on this occasion she did not turn up. If she had—well, the affaire Vardarma might never have existed, so far as I am concerned, and I should not be writing this. I waited and waited. I read through my *Paris-Soir*, and threw it away, after extracting the last piece of information from the advertisements. That is the important point: I threw away that paper, and a too efficient waiter swept it up.

At last, it was obvious even to me that Nada was not going to arrive. I had half expected it to be so, but I would not believe it until I could blink the fact no longer. I thought of other diversions; and naturally I thought of the free show that Grenant had offered me. It might be amusing to work off the cynical emotions I was experiencing by laughing at a fellow human being. Yes, I would go. But where? And when? My *Paris-Soir* was gone; and with it the details that Grenant had so obligingly provided.

I shrugged my shoulders and paid for the drinks I had had while I had been waiting. Even that was not open to me. I set off to wander in the Louvre Gardens, where I smelt the

hyacinths and inspected, without interest, the numerous statues that spring out of the bushes along the whole walk to the *petit Triomphe*—the smaller Arc de Triomphe.

And it was then that Luck, who I thought had, like Nada, deserted me, came to my aid. Just as I approached the sunken garden, that haunt beloved of lovers and no less of prying old ladies, I saw Grenouille. He was walking briskly. It was obvious that he was absorbed in his own affairs and had not seen me.

"Hey!" I shouted. "You! Can I come?"

He did not seem to resent this unceremonious address. Recognizing my voice, he waved his hand. As I drew level with him, he smiled slightly.

"Changed your mind, have you?" he said, with evident satisfaction. "That's better. A man doesn't find a cure for cancer every day."

That phrase, which I had heard before, almost made me regret my impulse. But I kept in step with him and smothered my feelings.

"No," I returned, as though the thought were a new one to me. "A man doesn't. Which way do we go?"

"We'll walk through to the Concorde and then pick up a bus. The doctor's house is in the Wagram."

A few minutes later we were being whirled along the right bank of the Seine. Everyone who knew the Paris of this period will remember the buses with their snub noses and the long promontaries sticking out behind only a few inches from the ground. They gave the sensation of skimming over the ground on a surf-board, and caused one to marvel how that platform could bear the weight of so many solidly packed people.

Grenant drew a paquet bleu from his pocket and offered me a cigarette.

"No, thanks," I said. "I don't smoke." He knew it all too well; we had had enough discussions on the subject.

"You would if you were a chemist like me," he said airily. (So he was a chemist now? Why? I wondered.) "It helps to take the nasty smells away from one's nose." He puffed the smoke from the cheap cigarette into my face.

"I'd prefer any sort of chemical to your cigarette," I rejoined, coughing. "Even sulphuretted hydrogen."

He took it quite calmly. His next words revealed the reason for his being a chemist this afternoon and for all this byplay.

"I'm on the point of a startling discovery," he went on, confidentially lowering his voice and casting a wary eye about him. "I'm making a powder that, when mixed with the Gaullois, will give the smoker the impression of a much more expensive cigarette. It can be either Virginian or Turkish, as he likes. That's a commercial proposition, that is. Of course, it's got its drawbacks. People won't think they're economizing if they buy Gaullois and they taste like an expensive cigarette. You see . . ."

I was resigning myself to my fate when, luckily, the bus arrived at our destination. We alighted on a corner, and Grenouille, with easy familiarity, pointed out the way.

"Just here," he explained. "Most convenient. Just look at that house, and tell me if it isn't exactly the sort of place a great scientist ought to live in?" He stood back and goggled at the façade, which was highly ornate.

"All sorts of people might live in it," I replied. I was not impressed. 'Get-rich-quick quack,' my mind was saying. "I can imagine ministers and cocottes living in it. Great scientists don't have to live in fashionable houses, Grenouille. In fact, I always suspect them if they do."

Grenant seemed disappointed at this cold reception of his enthusiasm, but he did not show any marked displeasure beyond a wrinkling of the brows. He had tried to intimidate me with the large grey stone house, elegant as only Parisian houses can be, and with a beautiful iron grille that served as an outer door.

"'Doctor Vardarma,'" he read aloud in a liturgical tone, pointing to a chromium bell-push, a bell-push of quite unnecessarily imposing size. "Shall I ring?" he asked reverently, as if overawed by the brightness and immensity of the plate.

"Why not?" I asked. "It is what we are here for, and we are obviously not the first." I nodded in the direction of a long line of Rolls-Royces and super-Renaults drawn up on each side of the street.

I was suddenly curious. Grenant, with his hesitations and his shiny suit, seemed quite out of place standing in front of this palatial house against a background of autos-de-luxe.

"Tell me," I said suddenly; "how did you get in with this Vardarma? Are you a friend of his, or what?"

"Not exactly a friend," he whispered, as he delicately pushed the bell. "I'm a friend of a friend—or, rather, of his assistant. Perhaps you know him—he's a fellow-countryman of yours—fellow named Gougloff."

"Never heard of him."

"Brilliant young chemist. Wonderful in his way. I think, Vardarma picked him up in some *bistro*."

The door was now opened by a lackey in white gloves and tasteful waistcoat striped in yellow and black, which gave him the air of a high-bred benevolent wasp.

"Cars must not be parked in front of the house, messieurs," he protested politely, after he had bowed as though to expected guests.

"What cars?" I asked, rather foolishly. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that a large limousine had appeared as if from nowhere and settled down right in front of the house. As I looked, some elegant people stepped from it and made their way towards the door.

The lackey's politeness to us did not decrease with the realization that he had made a mistake. His actions were most beautifully co-ordinated. Instead of allowing us to pass into the house, he waited until the occupants of the car had passed through and then, holding out his hand as a traffic policeman might, uttered the single word "Messieurs?"

"We are invited by Dr. Vardarma," Grenouille said boldly. "We are friends."

The man looked at us suspiciously, and Grenant made some sort of a sign, whereat we were permitted to enter the holy of holies. The lackey turned stiffly on his heel and asked us to follow him to the lift. A moment later we were gliding upwards in a handsome lift, full of illuminated nudities made of polished steel and cut glass. We did our not very convincing best to appear nonchalant and as though we were used to this sort of

thing. My gravity was rather disturbed by the thought that our coats were hardly less shiny than the gleaming steel.

"Is it true that Vardarma is expecting us?" I whispered to Grenant.

"Most certainly," he replied stiffly, as the lift stopped and the magnificent grille swung back silently and automatically. "My friend has extended an invitation to us on the doctor's behalf. It is essential that I, his discoverer, should be there."

He was well astride his hobby horse now, and I decided to remain silent. Besides, there was much to see. More dazzling lights lit up glass statuettes in the high, vaulted corridor, and the carpets were thick and lush, and of creamy-coffee tones. I found myself walking gingerly over this magnificence towards a large door, from behind which came that unmistakable buzz which announces a concourse of the rich, the famous, and the notorious.

"You're sure this isn't a debutante's tea party?" I asked doubtfully.

"Positive. Vardarma is an example of the successful scientist—he knows the world as well as his own subject. We should not envy him his luxury. After all, a man can just as well discover the cure for cancer in a ten-thousand-franc apartment as in a garret," he concluded, somewhat defensively, jealous of his doctor's fame.

"Undoubtedly. Germs are, unfortunately, ubiquitous. All the same, it takes money to run a place like this—those lights alone must burn a fortune—and research is pretty expensive. Has he a Croesus or a Monte-Cristo to back him?"

"Croesus!" Grenant laughed derisively. "Vardarma's not one, but a legion of them. Why, every motor-car outside there has a coat-of-arms on it! They all flock to him. The perfume-nobility, the armaments-nobility, the meat-packers nobility, even the chain-store nobility. He's so fashionable that his demonstrations are social events."

"Like spiritualism?" I suggested a little sarcastically.

"If you like." Grenant was obviously under the influence of his surroundings. Amid such wealth, he could afford to be vicariously magnanimous. "But what does it matter? The

master has found the cure for cancer. The world will be eternally grateful to him that he was willing to accept the full burden of overwhelming wealth—to sink his scientific humility on behalf of his ideals, and live like a rich man.”

He was revelling in his sophistry, which I could hardly follow, when the door of the reception room was opened to us by yet another lackey, so fat and well developed that he looked like a queen bee, and we were ushered in. Our hats were taken from us with polite insistence, and we were left holding undisputed control of a small square of carpet.

Women, beautiful as only Frenchwomen can be beautiful, were to be seen on every hand. They bloomed in many happy colours amid the austerities of the soberly clad men. The air was heady with the faint clouds of perfume that wafted to us as one flower-woman moved across the floor to greet another with simulated surprise and sugared insincerities.

“Mais, quelle surprise . . .” “Et toi?” . . . “Ah, chère mademoiselle . . .”

They reminded me, to change the floral metaphor, of a display of rare canaries at a bird show. The men talked in low tones, as though anxious not to put these exotic creatures off their song.

I was frankly amazed. Anything less like a serious scientific meeting was difficult to imagine.

“A nice scientific convention you’ve brought me to,” I said to Grenant, feigning a cough and speaking behind my hand.

Grenant started. “If you weren’t so busy looking at the ladies”—he kissed his hand extravagantly; he was quite exalted and above himself—“you’d notice some of the big noises there are about.”

I looked about me more keenly. It was a very easy thing to become hypnotized by this glittering display of the creations of Schiaparelli and Jean Patou. The crazy hats then coming into fashion were, by themselves, enough to unsteady a man’s eye. Now, I could see that Grenouille was quite right. They were all there—all the people one saw in the illustrated papers: the Great Scientist, the Famous Biologist, the Expert in Tropical Diseases, the Celebrated Surgeon; and they were flanked, like a

king by his courtiers, by physicians-about-town, professors-turned-journalist and the rest; and they were all shaking each other's well-manicured hands and making small noises of surprise, exceedingly well done, as each new name was shown into the room.

"I wonder how many startling discoveries these have made between them," mused Grenant, his reverence taking its usual form. "These are the luminaries, Borodin *mon vieux*—their names are known throughout the whole world. You must admit that Vardarma must have something, else would these trouble to come? Their time must be too valuable to waste. Just think of it—they're probably losing thousands of francs between them every minute."

I failed to be impressed. Mere names meant little to me. Indeed, my experience, short as it was, had already shown me that, all too often, the 'international expert' is an expert first and foremost at the art of attracting attention.

"His drawing room is certainly sumptuous," I remarked, looking about me. "Fitted out with all the latest and best. Tell me, what's that screen over there?"

I don't know why I expected Grenant to know, but he had assumed a sort of proprietorial air. I was not surprised, therefore, when he answered at once.

"That's a film screen," he explained eagerly. "You, St. Thomas of the Doubting Mind—you are going to see the cancer microbe on the screen—see it with your own eyes."

"And then, I suppose, we shall all disperse and take buns and tea. Just like an English school treat." I was doing my best to be heavily sarcastic. I wanted to wipe that satisfied, smug grin off Grenant's face. "Is that what you call a demonstration? Anyone can project a microbe on the screen. I'd do it myself, and show you species you'd never seen before and would never see again. Oh, yes; I know how to paint a slide. But will your Dr. Vardarma give us proof?"

"Certainly he will." Grenant drew himself up. "Gougloff and he have been busy preparing notes for days. You won't be disappointed. You'll see. Vardarma is a great man."

Both Grenant and I had raised our voices during these last

exchanges, and people were beginning to glance at us with well-bred curiosity and disapproval. I was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. But I was not allowed to remain thus for long. Barely a minute later, the main event—or rather the overture to the main event—commenced.

Chapter 4

DR. VARDARMA

THERE WAS something very theatrical about it all, and that increased my irritation. The lights—those subtle concealed lights that seemed to grow out of walls and from behind corners—suddenly went out. No, that is not right. They faded gradually, like cinema lights, and just as they were on the point of extinction, another light, bright and dazzling and very white, picked up a door at the far end of the room like a pointing finger. I could see the door open, though I heard no sound, and Vardarma was in the room.

That does not mean that I saw Vardarma at his moment of entry. There were too many people in front of me, all applauding delicately as they do when an unknown soloist comes into a concert-room. Perhaps it was their good breeding—their so obvious good breeding—that made them do that; after all, Vardarma's cocktails had to be repaid somehow. (I have forgotten to mention the cocktails in delicate Moorish glasses, handed round by a worker-wasp of slender build.) Then, as though they had been rehearsed, the Big Names and the beautiful women dispersed to the chairs provided for them in front of the silver screen.

Now I got my first view of Vardarma.

He was standing at the lighted end of the room, with that vehement beam, now a little restrained, playing on him. His head was inclined a little to one side, and there was a smile of mixed condescension and curiosity on his lips. "You have come to inspect me," he seemed to be saying, "but, really, I

am inspecting you. It is you, my friends, who are the real performers, the real specimens for examination."

He was a massive man, broad shouldered, stocky—a giant; but so well proportioned that you did not notice his great height at first. It was not until Gougaloff, his assistant, came in with some apparatus and stood beside him that I realized how tall he was. Yet even when you knew about the height, it was not his most impressive characteristic. No; his face was the most striking thing about him. I can truthfully say it was the most handsome, and at the same time the most wicked face I have ever seen. He looked like the incarnation of a satyr, but without the humorous malignancy. If he was evil—and I thought then that he was—then his evil was dark, sordid, unrelieved. His eyes were full of a bitter mockery. That was my first impression of him; and later I was to deepen that impression.

He had one other peculiar feature—his beard. It was raven blue, a colour of such darkness that his swarthy face looked comparatively white. I guessed he was a Levantine or a Greek. His accent was sibilant, and the phrases he chose had an odd exaggeration that somehow was shorn of bombast. He said everything so confidently and with so little effort that his words compelled attention, however sceptical or prejudiced his hearers might be. His eyes were small and had a curiously penetrating quality.

Of course, I did not see all this at the time, but I am describing him now because this is the right place to introduce him. Grenant and I were much too far away for me to see the man at all clearly. But even so, I do know that he made an immense impression on me.

Just after Vardarma had come into the room, I glanced at Grenouille. He had changed completely, as though he were under the influence of some physical spell. His face had that air of calm beatitude which one sees in a Leonardo da Vinci painting. His eyes filled with tears, and he clasped and unclasped his hands in nervous ecstasy.

"There he is," he whispered. "He is a great man—a really great man. You cannot deny it now. Even you must *feel* it."

He put his hand on mine and pressed it, and I could feel that his skin was very warm and wet. Idly, I wondered whether it was fever or hypnosis. Certainly he was behaving as though he were under some sort of hypnotic suggestion, but why, in the name of all that was wonderful, should Vardarma, a man to whom money meant nothing and before whom, it seemed, Paris society was prepared to bow down, want to hypnotize a nonentity like Grenant? Still, it probably was not direct hypnotism. Vardarma was obviously a man of compelling personality, and Grenant was a born hero-worshipper. It might be self-hypnotism for all I knew or—for that matter—cared.

I could not continue my speculations, interesting though they were. Our host was beginning his demonstration in a rich and commanding voice, persuasive without being glib, confident without being dogmatic.

"Gentlemen," he began, and then half smiled and bowed courteously. "I must be forgiven for addressing myself to the men only, but the invitation was issued to them alone. The ladies who have so graciously chosen to honour this demonstration with their unexpected and delightful presence will, I know, be patient, and allow us, the meaner sex, to have our little hour."

There was a titter of approval from the ladies. He had put everyone at ease; all were now on his side.

"I am honoured, too," he went on, "to see before me at this gathering so many of the leaders of science and medicine. Yet what I have to say and show to-day can be understood by the simplest, as can be all the greatest and most sublime truths."

I smiled to myself. 'This man knows how to sell himself,' I thought. 'Let us see if the goods he has to sell come up to the standard of the pretty wrapper.' I glanced at Grenant; the light of ecstasy still shone in his eyes.

"Cancer, as we know . . ." I listened attentively. There was just a trace of glibness in the voice, as though he were reciting. Or was it mere prejudice on my part?

"Cancer, as we know . . ." He kept on repeating the

phrase. It was a *leit-motif* introducing each time some elementary fact.

"It has long been a dictionary term and nothing more. . . . One of those hypothetical entities with which the Schoolmen used to play. . . .

"Scientists throughout the world have endeavoured patiently and courageously . . .

"Men in all ages have been puzzled by this tumour that grows and grows like a strawberry plant of a lush weed. . . . No amount of operating, no amount of radium treatment, can do any good once it has firmly implanted its evil roots, as you, gentlemen, know at least as well as I. . . ."

Twenty minutes by my watch. He had said nothing. It was words, words, words. When would he get down to facts?

"I do not claim to be the only one working on this stupendous problem. The scourge has been attacked from all angles, and I acknowledge freely how much I owe to my fellow-workers all over the world. But the camp of medicine is terribly split. Some say that cancer is the result of chemical forces. Others maintain that it is hereditary, but that it requires some chemical or bacterial agent to make it reveal itself. There are others who believe cancer to be inherent in all people, and that there is some simple, everyday cause that brings it out—the pollen of a flower, the irritation of a chemical, the ingress of a microbe.

"Gentlemen, these dissensions can now be resolved. Cancer is caused by a microbe."

He paused. There was some shifting of chairs accompanied by a few dissentient coughs. Evidently, I thought, the scientists are not prepared to take Vardarma over-seriously. I stared at him. He was quite unperturbed. He pretended to take the signs of restlessness as a tribute to himself.

"Yes, gentlemen, I can well understand your astonishment at my confidence. The bacterial theory is proven; and that is what I am to demonstrate to you this afternoon. I must, of course, admit that other men before me have held the same theory, as I have already said. But the years they spent in trying to raise their theory from the trough of doubt were spent in

vain. Where they failed, I have succeeded. The great discovery has been left to me. That is the sum and substance of my claim."

More signs of scientific hay-fever broke out; noses were blown and coughs sounded. A rustle of conversation broke out amongst the men. Vardarma waited patiently, a slight smile on his face.

"I can understand, gentlemen, that you are not prepared to accept my simple word for it. On the surface, my claims may appear extravagant. First, then, let us examine one or two of the methods propounded by the bacteriological school of cancer research. Fibiger comes immediately to mind."

"What about Fichera?" called someone in the audience.

"Yes; of course, there was Fichera also."

I had an uneasy feeling that Vardarma had left out that name so that he could be prompted. Nothing does more to create an atmosphere of friendly attention than permitting members of the audience to refresh one's memory. The lecturer has his form of showmanship no less than the music-hall artiste.

"Yes; there was Fichera," Vardarma continued; "and some assert that he was even greater than Fibiger, but I do not propose to enter into that kind of dispute. I will confine myself to Fibiger's work for the time being. Later, I must say something of Fichera, even at the risk of boring you by repeating what you already know. You see, gentlemen, unless you fully grasp the fact that my work began where those two researchers left off, that it does, in fact, combine their methods, you will not see in its true perspective my startling discovery."

The last two words caused me to smile, and I glanced at Grenant. But he was still wrapt in wonderment and awe, his mouth open a little and his eyes focused on a far distance. To him, at that moment, the world consisted of Vardarma and himself as a mere passive receptor of Vardarma's words; of that I am quite sure.

"I will be brief, gentlemen. Fibiger was an ingenious man and he evolved his theory by certain work on cockroaches." He waited for someone in the audience to confirm his statement, and then went on. "The exact genus escapes me, but it

is immaterial. The point is that he believed these creatures acted as host to a special kind of microbe. This, he affirmed, was the cancer microbe. Their fertility was amazing. They lived in the cockroaches' bellies. His theory commanded instant attention, and fellow-workers flocked to his laboratory, as you, to-day, have been good enough to come here. They, like you, uttered the scientists' prayer: 'Proof. Give us proof.' "

Vardarma's eyes flashed. "Again like me, but, if I may say so, with less reason, he was undismayed. He exhibited guinea-pigs and rabbits, which, he said, had been fed on the infected cockroaches; and all had cancers in their stomachs. The scientists nodded. Fibiger was awarded the Nobel Prize."

There was a gasp of approval, but it came from the ladies. Those of us who knew the rest of the story were wondering whether Vardarma would go on to reveal that Fibiger's theory was blown sky-high a few months later. At least, I wondered; and I am sure, from the suppressed chuckles I heard, the others did.

Vardarma obliged. "I do not have to tell you that Fibiger's elaborately built-up theory was disproved soon afterwards. As a result, the bacteriological theory received a serious setback."

That was all he said. He did not tell how Nature revenged herself on the hapless little Copenhagen professor, nor remind us that that astute old lady did not give up her secrets quite so easily. He did not explain that independent research workers showed that the so-called cancers were not cancers at all, but irritation caused by unaccustomed diet—neither more nor less than the cockroaches themselves. Fibiger had the Nobel Prize to console him, but he did not long enjoy that. Nature had her revenge. He died two years later from cancer of the stomach. Perhaps he had acquired it in some unknown way through his experiments. It often happens that an experimenter takes the wrong road, which leads not only to disappointment but to death. Despite its dramatic opportunities, this side of the story was neglected by Vardarma, and I wondered why.

Looking at him, as he stood there, like some new colossus

bestriding a world of ignorance, I decided that he was not at all the type of man to sacrifice himself for an ideal.

"Then there was, as you have reminded me, the Italian professor Fichera—he came, I think, from the university of—of . . ." Again he waited for the prompting, which came almost at once.

"Pavia," someone said obligingly.

"Pavia. Thank you. My mind sometimes loses touch with irrelevant details." (This was masterly.) "He also spent the best years of his life in experimenting on the bacterial theory, but his method was different from Fibiger's. He claimed that cancer was inherent in all of us. Everyone had cancer, according to him, and it was not microbes that caused it, but their secretions, their toxins. It was due to an external cause that released the potential cancer in us. But it came down to the same thing—to the isolation of the microbe whose toxins did the mischief. His search was unsuccessful. But he was not cast down. Instead, he asserted that the microbes were so infinitesimal that they were beyond the range of the microscope. His hopes were raised some years later when Rux demonstrated that the transmission of malignant growths in chickens was by means of an unfilterable and invisible virus. Science rejoiced. The problem seemed on the verge of solution. The suffering millions saw the first streaks of the dawn of release.

"But it was a false dawn. True, Rux's results were confirmed, but this unfilterable virus has never been isolated. Nothing could reveal it. No microscope could show it—if it existed—no dye could stain it; no filter could hold it.

"Now, before I reassert my claim, I may as well glance briefly at some other theories. Research still continues in these fields, but I am convinced it is a waste of time, money, and, what is more important, talent.

"The chemical theory has yielded poor results. Experimenters have tried the effect of—I think—one thousand and ninety-nine chemical agents. There are a few billion combinations yet to be investigated. I wish these workers luck."

There was a faint chuckle from somewhere; Vardarma's shaft had got home.

"Then there is the theory that cancers result from the tearing off of skin tissues from their proper surroundings, so that they form internal islands that grow to malignancy and spread all over the body. There is little need to go into details. In the process of birth, a piece of the top skin layer may, it is true, become isolated in the lowest layer or the middle layer. It is alleged that this develops into a tumour, which is cancer.

"I have nothing to say to this theory. Like the others, it can be discarded. I have been privileged to discover the microbe. In all probability, Fichera was right, and what I have found is that which Rux could not isolate. My success is due to the fact that I have been able to stain it and thus bring it to light under the microscope. I have studied the habits of this organism exhaustively. I have been able to collect its toxins from the stomachs of guinea-pigs fed with food in which it was present. By using certain sera from the guinea-pigs' blood, I have produced the anti-toxin."

Vardarma leant forward. His small eyes seemed like pin-points of fire.

"My discovery is complete. I thank you."

Chapter 5

CURE FOR CANCER

A STRANGE hush filled the room. It was not the sort of silence that follows an outstanding performance in the concert-room or on the stage, when, in the professional phrase, 'the audience has been knocked stone cold.' Rather it was the odd hypnotized silence of the bird about to flutter into the mouth of the waiting cat. I tried hard to think. Vardarma had made assertions—dozens of them. But he had not offered one word of proof. I glanced once more at Grenant. He was paralysed with awe. And as my gaze travelled from face to face, I saw

the same expression. Their minds had been stunned by the fierceness of the onslaught. They had been bludgeoned into insensibility by sheer weight of words.

Something broke in me. It was outrageous. Before I realized what I was doing, I was speaking. My voice seemed to slash through that horrible silence as though it was something tangible.

"That is all very interesting, Dr. Vardarma," I called, raising my voice. "But can you offer us any proof that your anti toxin works?"

My words had the desired effect. I do not think I expected Vardarma to answer. I wanted only to reintroduce action and sanity into the audience. I succeeded. There was a sudden buzz of conversation, and I was conscious of heads here, there and everywhere, being turned towards me.

Vardarma took up the challenge instantly. It has been what he wanted. I had played into his hands. I saw that at once and wanted to kick myself.

"A very pertinent question comes from the back of the room," he said, with obvious emphasis on the origin of the question—that is, myself and my obscure position away from the notabilities. "Of course, I am only too glad to offer proof. I should not think of insulting anyone here—*anyone*"—again this was clearly directed at me—"by asking that my unsupported statements should be accepted. You will understand, of course, that I cannot be expected yet to make public my formulae or give hints, even, on the actual course of my experiments. I cannot and will not do that until everyone has accepted my theory and is satisfied with its proof. Then I shall happily give the full report and results of my researches to the nation."

These words were greeted with a loud murmur of approval.

"Doctor Gougaloff," he went on, seeming for the first time to notice his assistant, who had been with him all along, "will you be good enough to project the slide of the cancer microbe on the screen so that everyone can inspect it. I want it to be visible from all parts of the room—even the back."

He was not prepared to let me be forgotten.

The few remaining dimmed lights were switched off, and a

brilliant patch appeared on the screen. Into the patch came the figure of a goodly sized microbe. It was obviously projected through a microscope—and a high-power one at that. The predominating colour was purple, but that, of course, was the dye, which I suspected was nothing at all unusual. It was, in fact, just one of the aniline series. In appearance, it resembled a streptococcus—with some additions. But it looked genuine enough.

It was all very interesting, but it still was not convincing. What proof was there that this was the cancer germ? Vardarma was ready with the answer. He was obviously prepared to dispel all our doubts.

"Now," he said, after giving us time to admire the image on the screen. "You have seen this microbe, which I claim to be the cancer-bearing germ. I am anxious to answer the question that was fired at me from the back of the room."

Again those necks craned towards me, but I stood—or rather sat—my ground. I met that concentrated gaze of eminence and beauty without flinching. Vardarma saw he had made a mistake—that is, if he had aimed at disconcerting me. Indeed, he looked a trifle annoyed at the attention I was attracting. He raised his voice, which now held a hint of strain; and the heads were turned again in his direction.

"This questioner asked for proofs that my anti-toxin works—that is, attains results. Now it follows that if I do demonstrate that the anti-toxin is successful, you must be satisfied that I have discovered the cancer microbe. I appreciate that only a rigid demonstration is permissible. I cannot prove it to you in any other way. If the anti-toxin works, then the microbe you see on the screen before you is the virus that has scourged the world for so long and is now to be eliminated."

He was labouring the point in an obvious effort to play on our impatience. But he saw that he had overdone it, and he came quickly to the point.

"In my clinic here, I have five people suffering from inoperable tumours. You will all grasp the significance of that. Some of you present here to-day are responsible for having sent these patients to me. (You had said to them, in effect: 'We

can do nothing for you. Our resources—the resources of modern medicine and surgery—are helpless in your case. Go to Dr. Vardarma and see whether he can substantiate his claim.' Well, I have done all that you and the patients asked. Every one of the patients came from a different practitioner. I shall be obliged if the gentlemen concerned will step forward so that they can give their own testimony independently."

Now, I thought, what trickery is he up to? I was still unconvinced. But when I saw five of the best-known surgeons and physicians in Paris—one of them a man to whose lectures I had listened with respect and close attention—come forward, I must confess I felt confused. He could not have secured the support of such men if there was nothing in his cure. Had I, then, been mistaken in Vardarma? Had I been prejudiced because of Grenant's lyrical praise and the outward show of luxury and fashion? What right had I to let my mind, which I thought so coldly scientific, be swayed by such irrelevant factors? Each man to his own methods, I thought ruefully. There was no reason why a man in a morning coat should not discover a cure for cancer as much as a man in a white overall. Perhaps, if you looked at it dispassionately, he had more chance; for the laboratory worker is all too often bound up with his own ideas.

These five walked up to Vardarma with obvious pleasure. None showed the slightest reluctance. Each, in fact, seemed glad to take part in the demonstration. I suppressed, almost shamefacedly, the thought of penitents coming to the table at a revivalist meeting.

Vardarma turned first to one I recognized as a consulting physician.

"Is it not true," Vardarma asked, "that you sent Patient No. 1 to me suffering from inoperable cancer of the breast?"

The doctor's assent was a monosyllabic "*Oui*."

Next, Vardarma turned to a surgeon. "It is no less true," he went on, "that you were able yesterday to operate on this same patient, No. 1, and remove the tumour, which you found was non-malignant and, indeed, had almost disappeared?"

Again there was a single "*Oui*."

Vardarma nodded and faced another physician. "Now, *M. le docteur*, you were good enough to send me a patient whom I shall call No. 2. This patient was suffering from a malignant cancer of the stomach. He was operated on some two months ago and the surgeon closed the stomach because he could do nothing. After three weeks' treatment in my clinic, the same surgeon operated on the patient and discovered that the tumour had *completely* disappeared. This time he closed the abdomen, not because he had abandoned hope, but because there was nothing to operate upon. Am I right?"

The five doctors chorused an affirmative. This was conclusive. No one demanded further proof. The integrity of the five men, their professional experience, their very names, all were unimpeachable support for Vardarma's claims.

"Any professional man among you," Vardarma said—or rather purred—"is invited to visit these patients at any time to test the validity of what these gentlemen say!" Then he added, with a touch of irony: "Perhaps the gentleman at the back would like to ask some further questions."

I must confess to being nonplussed. Yet I felt I had to justify myself. I wanted to speak, but did not know what to say. Vardarma, however, had not finished with me.

"Perhaps this inquiring gentleman will tell us, as a matter of interest, in what capacity he is here, and let us know his no doubt high professional qualifications."

I answered promptly. "I am a student of the Medical Faculty at the Sorbonne. I am in my final year. I humbly apologize for my question, but I was carried away by my enthusiasm."

Vardarma smiled patronizingly. "A student," he commented. "We are honoured. You are among the new men of science, and we hope that you will strain every effort to make startling discoveries in the treatment of human disease and suffering."

With that he turned his back and began conversing with the people—men and women—who were crowding eagerly round him.

Grenant, suddenly emerging from his trance, faced me with a glow of undisguised triumph on his face.

"You see " he crowed. "What did I say? A man doesn't discover a cure for cancer every day."

"No," I replied meekly. "A man doesn't."

I was about to continue my abasement further, when Vardarma started speaking again.

"I have been asked a very interesting question," he said, obviously talking to the whole room. "This time it is from a gentleman whose name, if I mentioned it, would be known by you all. He asks whether I can offer proof that the anti-toxin effects a permanent cure. I am happy to say that I can. There is a person in this room who has been so cured. He was one of my earliest patients. Monsieur Ferdinand Grenant, perhaps you will come forward and give the history of your case."

Astonishment is quite an inadequate word to express my emotion. I stood rooted to the ground as Grenouille, his face full of embarrassed smirks, moved towards the doctor. Vardarma placed his hand on Grenant's shoulder.

"M. Grenant," he said slyly, "is also a student of the Medical Faculty. He became a student there in gratitude for what medicine had done for him and in order to fit himself to become my assistant at a later date."

Grenant smirked again and then began his recital in a sing-song voice, like a policeman giving evidence in court.

"I am forty-one years of age. My name is Ferdinand Grenant and I study at the Medical Faculty at the Sorbonne. Six months ago, I was operated on for an unknown tumour, which was found to be a cancer, and my case was thereupon declared inoperable. I was sent home and told I had at most a year to live. It was by pure chance I heard of Dr. Vardarma, and learnt that he was experimenting in cancer research. I offered myself as a living body on which he could experiment.

"At that time, Dr. Vardarma was at the end of his researches and was contemplating publication, but though he was confident he did not feel inclined to apply his results to me. I implored him, however, saying I had nothing to live for, and that if he failed there was nothing to lose. After much persuasion, I was injected with the anti-toxin, and I prepared myself, my papers, and my effects, in case anything should go

wrong. I do not think I need say more, except that I am here as a living and grateful witness to the success of his methods."

Vardarma smiled, patted Grenant encouragingly, and raised his voice.

"I think that should resolve the last remaining doubts," he said. "M. Grenant will, I am sure, gladly submit himself to examination if any of the professional gentlemen think it necessary."

Apparently, the professional gentlemen did not consider it necessary, though one or two voiced the view that it might be as well if M. Grenant would present himself for examination in, say, another six months' time. Grenant agreed. He looked as though he would have agreed to anything. Vardarma patted him again and dismissed him, for all the world like a man saying "Good dog"; and, indeed, at that moment poor Grenouille looked exactly like a mongrel that has been unexpectedly praised when it expected blame.

Chapter 6

EXHIBIT "A"

By now it was getting late and many people began to move towards the door. I myself, the victim of conflicting thoughts, wanted to get away. But Vardarma had not finished. With one accord, his audience turned to listen.

"I shall not detain you long," he said; and his voice had not quite the earlier self-confidence. It was ingratiating, rather, and sympathetic. "I can hardly tell you how difficult it is for me to say what I have to say after all your kind congratulations and expressions of goodwill. There is, however, one thing I must say."

He drew a deep breath. I had a strong suspicion of what was coming, but I was wholeheartedly with him now, even though there were one or two points in Grenant's story that wanted explanation and amplification. Vardarma had proved

himself to my satisfaction, and I was feeling very small and humble in the midst of so much eminence. I had come to laugh, but I was not remaining to pray. No, I was prepared to run with my tail between my legs. But I decided it would only draw more unwanted attention to myself if I left before Vardarma had said what he wanted to say.

"You all know," Vardarma went on, "that research is an expensive business. Instruments, apparatus, experiments, overheads, the running of a free clinic—all these things take a not inconsiderable sum of money. Moreover—and this is the essential point—the method of preparing the anti-toxin is costly. Until a cheaper way is found—and I am working to that end night and day, so that the benefit may be brought within the reach of all—I must carry on as it is and make the best of my slender resources. It is in no spirit of vainglory that I tell you I have exhausted all my private means. I have used every penny I was able to save as a practitioner overseas. I have not hesitated to use my daughter's dowry. If it had not been for the kindness of certain ladies, who wish to remain anonymous in the true tradition of the real benefactor, I should not have been able to advance as far as I have.

"Now this is a very delicate subject for a man of science to discuss. If it was for myself, I could not do it. The very thought fills me with shame. But when a scientist speaks not for himself but in the name of humanity—then, I feel, the case is different. It becomes a matter of conscience. If it is still begging—very well then, I must and shall beg. I am not ashamed of that. But my work cannot continue without money. Nor can I expect the Government or any private enterprise to assist me until such time as I have overcome all the doubts I still have to face. Therefore, I have no means open but to rely on private subscriptions. You will, I think, understand what I mean.

"Let me insist on one thing. I am not asking anyone to recoup me for the past. If I had my money back again, I should spend it again in the same way. Personal comfort is nothing to me. I seek to finance the future. I want to employ lecturers— young men of courage and determination—whom I shall send

into all the corners of France—nay, of Europe and the whole world—to demonstrate the anti-toxin and its use. It depends on what financial backing I have whether thousands must die or live. You who have come here and been so kind to me, you are something more than my friends—if you will allow me to call you that; you are my witnesses. You have it in your power to be friends and supporters not of a mere individual like myself, but of humanity at large—and that part of humanity which most needs friendship and support: the thousands who have in them the prolific seeds of death and to whom medical science has to-day nothing to offer. I need say no more. Thank you.”

Without another look at his audience, Vardarma bowed low and left the room with Gougloff close behind him. The conversation welled up again like summer dew in the morning sun. It grew into a flood that ran everywhere. Men and women spoke in astonishment and loud praise.

“A wonderful man, a wonderful man!” I heard it on all sides, even from a grey-bearded old professor, who, as I knew to my cost, had for his students no more emotional word of praise than: “It’ll have to do.”

Still more impressive, however, was that a number of ladies and gentlemen took out their cheque books and began writing in them without a moment’s hesitation. Others, however, did hesitate—but only when it came to deciding on what figures to fill in. They crowded round the five medical witnesses. Was everything in order, they asked; and five heads nodded pontifically. Then how much money would he need? The doctors shrugged; as much as possible, they said.

I had nothing to add to this golden shower. A student can give nothing but himself. Nevertheless, I was glad to see so much gladly given wealth.

“Vardarma knows how to pick his audiences,” I remarked to Grenant. “Oh, I’m not being superior. I’m very glad. One doesn’t often find a research worker so bold and outspoken on the money question, but he put it very well. I hope it simply rolls in.”

“You see? You see?” Grenant snapped his fingers glee-

fully. After all, it was almost his show as much as the doctor's. "I was right, wasn't I? You don't find a man with a cancer cure every day, do you?"

"You certainly don't—at least, not a real one. I'm sorry for all my scepticism, Grenouille, but you know, everything did look fishy. Anyway, it's given you the triumph of your life."

"It's all Vardarma's," he said with dignity.

"All right. By the way, I didn't know you'd had cancer."

"Of course I did," he replied quickly. "It was a startling discovery, I can tell you. I had it all the time, and I didn't know."

"Until you went to Vardarmas?"

"That's right. He told me I had cancer, and I went to be operated on, just as I said. Then he injected me with the serum, and now I'm as well as can be. There's proof for you, my doubting friend."

"Yes," I frowned. "Everything is quite foolproof, though I still don't know whether I'm a fool or your Dr. Vardarma has something." A sudden doubt clouded my mind. "By the way, what made him say you'd taken up medicine out of gratitude? I thought . . ."

Grenant checked me. "That was only a way of putting it. Of course, I have been in and out of the medical course for years now. But at that time I really had given it up for good. I'd settled on philosophy as the only thing worth studying. I thought that medicine was just all show. Then he convinced me it was otherwise, so I made up my mind then and there to finish the course."

"I see. And qualify as his assistant?"

His eyes glowed. "I'd black his boots if he wanted me to."

"You certainly admire him. But I give you best. I think there is something in it. After all, he couldn't fool all those experts, could he?"

"Are you asking me or yourself?"

"All right, Grenouille, you win. We'd better go."

We made our way to the door and were about to approach the queen wasp on the subject of our hats, when the door

through which Vardarma had disappeared opened and Gougloff appeared. He looked about the room anxiously as though trying to spot someone he was not sure of recognizing. Then, seeing Grenant, he hurried towards us.

"So you two are together," he remarked. "Here. I've a letter for you."

"For me?" Grenant's eyes lit up.

Gougloff shook his head. "No. Your friend. You are the one who asked the question, aren't you?"

I reddened as I admitted it.

"Here it is." He thrust an envelope into my hand. "But don't open it till you get home. The doctor said so."

And with that he scurried away.

"What on earth . . . ?" I looked helplessly at Grenant, who was wearing a puzzled frown.

"I don't know. But don't open it till you get home. I'd do what he says."

But I could not wait as long as that. I opened it as the long-rumped bus bore us back whence we had come. It was only a short note, and it was signed by Gougloff, not by the doctor. Moreover, I could not see the reason for all the display of secrecy.

"Dr. Vardarma would like to see you to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock," it ran.

"What on earth does he want with me?" I demanded of Grenant. "Does he want to score off me again, or what?"

Grenouille shook his head.

"It's beyond me. But I'd go. He's a queer bird, that Vardarma. He takes sudden fancies to people. Look how he picked up Gougloff. Don't you remember he said something about wanting assistants to tour France and the world?"

I grunted. But I resolved none the less to find out what the odd doctor wanted.

Chapter 7

A NEW JOB

THERE WERE still a lot of points about this business that seemed to me to cry out for explanation. I was still not convinced that that highly coloured slide Vardarma had shown was really the cancer germ. He did not seem to know what it was himself, and, in fact, contradicted himself. First he had said that the germ was probably Fichera's; but Fichera's was an unfilterable virus and ultra-microscopic. No amount of staining would make it appear in the field of a microscope; and yet there was the thing as large as life, or, rather, several thousand times as large. It was all very puzzling. So was this affair of Grenant. I had known Grenouille for a good time, certainly more than six months, and he had never said a word to me about cancer until that afternoon. I had taxed him with it, and he had replied readily enough that Vardarma had asked him to keep it secret even from his closest friends until the time came for revelation. Well, that was all right, so far as it went. But would I, who was always keeping my eyes open, have failed to detect signs of inoperable cancer in someone I saw almost every day?

But I couldn't deny the proofs that Vardarma had brought forward. Nor could I stand against the testimony of those five eminent doctors—especially Professor Cirron, who had always struck me, at lectures and in the clinic, as the last word in scientific scepticism. No; there was no getting round it. Vardarma was a great man. In spite of my intellectual doubts, I believed in his cure. More than that, I *wanted* to believe in it. What did it matter if that gorgeous microbe was only a fake, even if Vardarma himself was suffering from self-delusion about it? There had been a good many important discoveries made on false premises. The eighteenth-century chemists found out quite a lot on the phlogiston theory, though anything less like the truth would be difficult to imagine. Vardarma had the anti-toxin; it brought results; that was good enough for me. How and when he had discovered it, I did not know, and I questioned Grenant on the subject.

"He was in Algiers, you know," he said vaguely. As if that had anything to do with it! I didn't care a fig if he had discovered it in Tahiti or Cochin China or at the bottom of a coal mine, for that matter. It was of no importance. Wherever he came from, however he worked, Vardarma was a great doctor.

So it was that when I presented myself at his house the next morning I felt I was on the threshold of great events—as, indeed, I was, though hardly in the sense I imagined. I was, of course, kept waiting the number of minutes appropriate to my status. Vardarma, as I have said, was a great doctor.

At last I was ushered in to the presence. He raked me with those small, piercing eyes before he spoke. If that germ of his was real and had been subjected to that gaze amplified by the lenses of a microscope, it had my sympathy.

"So you're a student?" he said musingly, obviously not expecting me to answer. "Yes. You're the right one. You asked a very sensible question." Again he scoured me with his eyes. "You are poor?" he asked suddenly.

I found myself answering that indeed I was poor, very poor. I was, in fact, working as a waiter in order that I might continue my course.

"Very creditable," he remarked, with that touch of irony I was to come to know so well. "I like to hear of enthusiasm in the young. Now then: how would you like to be one of my assistants?"

He fired the question at me just like that—point blank. No beating about the bush or asking what I had studied or intended to do. No. How would I *like* to be one of his assistants?

"You remember I mentioned I needed young men of courage and talent for my demonstrations. I think you have both." He seemed to take the whole matter as settled. "Your salary will be two thousand francs a month. Satisfied?"

I grinned. I could not help it. The whole thing was so ludicrous with anti-climax.

"Certainly," I replied. "I'm satisfied all right. But I've no qualifications of any sort, you know, doctor."

He made an impatient gesture. "I don't want qualifications—at least not the sort you mean. A bit of parchment with a

seal on it doesn't make you any more a man. I want brains, tact and loyalty. You can take your degree in your spare time, and you'll have plenty of that if you follow my instructions carefully."

"I'm very grateful to you," I muttered. I was rather puzzled by this business, as indeed I was about everything concerned with this man. I felt as if he had seized my destiny in his hands and was wringing it dry; and they were very powerful hands. But the doubts soon floated away, leaving behind a very rosy outlook. I had found a protector—and a great one at that; I was to have two thousand francs a month and a job that did not demand qualifications; and I was to have ample spare time for my studies—or other things. What a pity Nada had left me flat! Perhaps if I had been older I might have been suspicious; as it was, I was overjoyed.

"You can start as soon as you're ready," Vardarma went on. He showed no particular anxiety over when it should be. Indeed, the whole affair seemed to be ended so far as he was concerned, for he began looking at his desk, which I saw to be covered with letters and slips of what looked like pink and blue and green paper—cheques, I had no doubt.

Suddenly he looked up. "I will be frank with you," he said abruptly. He gave me a very direct look. "We need money, and we mustn't be ashamed of asking for it. Research is expensive, you must understand, and if our good work is to go on, we must make and take money."

"I see. Is that the purpose of the demonstration?"

"Exactly." He smiled as though in praise of my perspicuity. Once more he stared at me, but I remained unmoved; I did not drop my eyes. "Good," he went on. "Some people are embarrassed—you've only got to mention money to them and they go pink. I don't think you're like that."

"Certainly not. Besides, I shan't be asking money for myself, but for science."

"Precisely. Bear that in mind—and above all, remind your audiences of it frequently."

He pressed a bell-push underneath his desk top and Gougloff came in.

"Gougloff," he said, "this is M. Borodin. You are to be

colleagues. I hope you'll be friends." Gougaloff held out his hand, and I grasped it warmly. It was something to be with a fellow-Russian. "You'll be good enough to give him all the data. He saw my demonstration yesterday, as you know, and I'm certain he is capable of carrying one out for himself. Send him to Countess Xavier de Melprise this afternoon. She has promised me a large gathering of people who are interested in my cancer curc. He had better take Grenant with him." He turned to me. "You remember Grenant's part in the demonstration? It's important."

I nodded. Perhaps I remembered it more clearly than anything else.

"And you know what to do with the slide showing the microbe. Gougaloff will give you full details about it, and he'll also give you notes so that you can answer any possible questions they might put to you. You probably know enough already about Fibiger and Fichera to get out an attractive introduction."

I smiled in spite of myself. "Yes," I said, "they are attractive enough as an introduction, but their ends are not so attractive."

Vardarma laughed. "That doesn't matter. You can tell those ends if you like, but I find people are sensitive to such things, so I miss them out. Anyway, the story is that their ends, whatever they were, are our beginnings. But there's no harm in mentioning that Fibiger died of cancer himself and Fichera blew out his brains. It only goes to show how disappointing scientific research can be, my dear fellow, and how important it is to keep things going." He faced again towards Gougaloff, who stood meekly by his side. "You will give M. Borodin everything he needs for the demonstration. I myself will come down at the end of your lecture to-day. I'm afraid I shan't always be able to support you like that, though; you'll have to learn to work on your own."

"Of course, doctor. I quite understand. Is that all?"

"I think so." He dismissed Gougaloff with a wave of the hand. When the door had closed behind his assistant he said in a low voice, in which I thought I detected a hint of intimacy :

"Gougaloff is a very capable assistant, but he has no independence. He just cannot work on his own. He is highly strung, too, and apt to exaggerate, so don't take him too seriously. Just go about your work and take your instructions from me—from me only. You understand?"

I nodded my head firmly. He smiled. It was a frozen, absent-minded sort of smile, as if he were forcing it on his face, but I had no opportunity of studying it.

"You can go," he said curtly, turning to his desk. "You'll find Gougaloff in the laboratory."

For a moment or two I stood outside his door. I felt lost. Not only was I in a strange house, not knowing where to find the room I wanted, but there was something so unaccountably odd about the whole affair. Yesterday I had been a struggling student; now I was apparently an assistant to a great man, and moreover that man's deputy as a lecturer. My position threatened to overwhelm me. But at that moment, when I felt like taking to my heels and fleeing the house, Paris, France itself, I caught sight of a door at the end of the corridor with the word LABORATORY painted in chaste black letters on its spotless white surface. I tapped gently and went in.

Gougaloff was sitting on a high stool preparing a microscope slide. He did not look up.

"The doctor sent me to you," I said simply. "You're Russian, aren't you?"

Gougaloff merely nodded. I looked over his shoulder at the slide.

"Is that for to-day's lecture?" I asked, determined to get something out of this morose man.

He nodded again.

"What I can't understand is that if the microbe is unfilterable, how did you manage to pick it up on a slide?"

Gougaloff put down the slip of glass and swung round savagely.

"Don't ask questions," he snapped. "I know nothing. You ask him if you want to know anything. I'm here to prepare the stuff and give it to you. That's all. I suppose he warned you not to take any notice of me."

He swung round and resumed his work. I studied him for a few minutes, trying to find out exactly what he was doing.

"But you're painting the microbe on the slide," I exclaimed.

"Of course I am," he retorted surlily. "Vardarma's got the original, and this is a copy. You don't think he'd be so foolish as to give it to a lecturer or his assistants, do you?"

"Oh, I see what you mean. He's frightened we might steal it," I added naively.

"Exactly."

"It's quite understandable."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Well, I do. I can understand it. It doesn't matter so long as the slide is an exact reproduction of the original. Even yesterday, I half imagined that you couldn't possibly have magnified it to that extent. Why, it must have been hundreds of thousands of diameters."

"That was clever of you." He curled his lips. "But remember this—so far as the lecture is concerned, this is the microbe." He tapped the slide. "Understand?"

"Yes, of course. If it's questioned, I shall say it is an exact copy. Anyway, it doesn't matter at all. The microbe itself is probably almost invisible even when it's dyed. The important point is that Vardarma has discovered the anti-toxin. After that, what does it matter what number of arms and legs the wretched thing has? So long as it can be recognized, it can be isolated and the anti-toxin prepared. I suppose that's your real job, isn't it—preparing the serum?"

"Of course it isn't. It's got nothing to do with you. Vardarma makes the anti-toxin himself."

"How foolish of me! I might have known. Naturally, he wouldn't give his secret away yet, would he?"

Gougaloff laid down the slide and glared at me.

"I wish you wouldn't stand there asking damn-fool questions. I've got a lot of work to do to prepare the lecture for you. Go away. Go and have lunch or bathe in the Seine—anything you like—so long as you leave me alone until two at the earliest. I'll have your bag packed. And listen—put on your best pair of bags and brush your hair carefully. You're going into

Society, my boy. You're going to sell Dr. Vardarma's patent cancer cure, and the crease in your bags helps to make a good sale."

Gougloff was so much engrossed glaring at me malevolently that he did not notice Vardarma's entry. Nor did I. I started when I heard the doctor's voice at my elbow.

"Gougloff is right, M. Borodin," he said suavely. "You must put on your best clothes. You understand, you are going into the best house in Paris, and though it may irk your scientific habit of mind, the law of Society is the best suit."

His suaveness suddenly dropped from him, and he turned on Gougloff with a threatening gesture. His voice was savage.

"And listen, you piebald, stinking little chemist," he blazed; "you keep your opinions to yourself. I keep you here to work for me, not to make clever remarks about Vardarma's cancer cure, patent or otherwise. If you had any sense at all in that thick head of yours, you'd make a discovery yourself, instead of washing out test tubes for others. Clear out!"

Gougloff changed in a trice. He was no longer morose or bad-tempered. Instead of running from the room, as I half expected, he smiled.

"Why, yes, Dr. Vardarma," he said meekly, without a trace of the brusqueness he had used towards me. "It's a pleasure to work for you. I'm sorry if I've said anything I shouldn't have said. It's my nerves, you know."

Vardarma cast a contemptuous glance at him and nodded to me. "Ignore the fool," he said. "I warned you, remember. He's like a dog; the harsher you are with him, the better he likes it. I shouldn't stand any sort of nonsense from him, if I were you, Borodin."

I did not know what to say. I hate to see people—even people I dislike—humiliated before strangers; and I was a stranger, after all. I had a nasty taste in my mouth and was already beginning to regret that I had thrown in my lot with Vardarma. He might be a great man and a brilliant discoverer, but as a human being he was despicable. But that, I argued with myself, was the way of genius. Genius was never comfortable to live with, people said; and I supposed that Vardarma's

lack of humanity in his personal relations was in some way due to his work for humanity as a whole, that he had, as it were, a certain limited stock, all of which was used up in his larger aim of alleviating suffering and distress.

And I did not know what to make of Gougaloff. Was he really the craven he seemed to be or was he merely playing a part? No sooner had the door closed behind the doctor than he recovered his composure. Composure is not the right word; it is better to say that he became a normal human being, for his face went red with fury. It was the first time I suspected that he could react as an ordinary human being.

"You see how he speaks to me?" he flamed, but more to himself than to me. "I don't know why I put up with it. But I'm not the only one. He talks to everyone like that—anyone who crosses his path. You be careful, Borodin. He'll make you feel a worm if you give him the slightest opportunity. He's a devil, a monster. When he looks at you he spits in your eyes with his eyes." It was an odd turn of speech, but I knew what he meant. "Oh, those eyes! They are vile—vile. I hate him. I detest his smugness, his cocksureness, his swagger, his confidence that he can master anyone's will. Did you hear what he called me? That was mild compared to what he can do. You might think he came from the gutter. Who knows?" he added darkly.

I have set this out connectedly, but it was not spoken like that. Not at all. Gougaloff's words came with difficulty. Between each sentence—each word, almost—he breathed hard, and his hands trembled with the intensity of his emotion. I myself barely realized what had happened. I could not understand this sudden change from meekness to ferocity, from servility to reviling. It could be nothing but nerves. Vardarma had, in truth, already warned me. But neither nerves nor Vardarma's opinion could fully explain the deep bitterness underlying Gougaloff's outbreak; nor could I find any reason for the utter contempt in which Vardarma obviously held him. Here was a puzzle indeed. The whole place teemed with puzzles; and perhaps it was that, more than anything else, which calmed my doubts of the wisdom of staying in so strange a

place. I wanted to get to the bottom of the whole affair. On the face of it, it became more fishy the farther one went. Yet there were proofs, and far better men than I—men of wide knowledge with experience of actual cases—accepted those proofs unhesitatingly.

"He has an iron will," went on Gougaloff. "He has no inhibitions—absolutely none. If you told me he came straight from hell and his feet were cloven hoofs, I would believe you. But wait till you see his daughter—then you'll understand. He lives with her." He gave me a curious glance I could not fathom; nor was I sure of the significance of his last few words.

"What has all this to do with me?" I asked impatiently. Gougaloff seemed to have set out to be slanderous merely for his own personal satisfaction—to let off steam, as I suspected, for the drubbing Vardarma had given him.

"Nothing at present, perhaps." He smiled in a twisted way. "But it will. You wait. You just wait. She'll be here soon. She always comes about midday to take her father to lunch. I warn you—don't say I haven't. She's beautiful. She's dreadfully beautiful."

"Are you in love with her?" I asked point blank, with a sudden flash of insight.

He laughed harshly. His face knotted into an ugly grimace and his thin hands clenched tight as he drummed on the laboratory bench.

"Love her? You must be mad—but then you don't know her. Listen, Borodin. You can love a snake, an asp, perhaps a scorpion—but not Malna. She has loved her father—understand? She loves him. She is horribly like him—so like him, with the same contempt, the same mad hatred of everyone, as he has. They kiss in front of me. They know it is torture for me, but they do it all the same. They do it on purpose."

"Then you do love her," I cried, thankful to find so simple a solution of the mystery.

"Yes." He hissed the word and his shoulders slumped forward. "Yes, I love her. It is a love for hatred—not love. I love her because she has shown me the meaning of complete hatred, because she is evil, because she is all I loathe in life."

"Does she love you?" I saw nothing incongruous in the question. I did not even ask myself why I should be prying into this man's soul when I had known him only a few minutes. It just happened.

"Love me?" He laughed again, a terrifying grating sound that diminished to a series of little sniggers that were uncanny. "Love? She hates love—she hates all its softness and tenderness, but she craves to possess it. That's why she loves her father. She knows there is a bond of blood between them—a bond she can have with no one else. I know it. She spurns me and torments me because she hates my love."

I am afraid most of what he said passed over my head. I could not grasp it. Every time I tried to follow his reasoning—if reasoning it was—I failed. Yet I did not find it strange. He stared at me and then realized I did not understand. His fury returned.

"I will not work for this hypocrite, this father of lies," he shouted, banging his fist on the bench so that the bottles shivered. "I'll tell you everything, Borodin—everything. Then you can judge for yourself."

"Quiet!" I was mortally afraid lest Vardarma should hear—not for myself, but for what might happen to Gougloff; I did not put physical violence beyond the range of Vardarma's strange emotions. "If you have anything to say, there's no need to raise your voice so that the whole house can hear you. Besides, I'm not really interested in your love problems, except where they concern me directly." I was trying hard to appear indifferent and self-centred, though the whole problem fascinated me. "If you've got something to tell me, wait till this evening when we are free. Come and have a drink with me."

A remarkable change came suddenly over Gougloff. He had not once looked up from the bench, at which he was staring with unseeing eyes, yet he stiffened like a gun-dog that smells game.

"She's here," he whispered intensely. "There—at the end of the table. She must have heard everything. Be careful."

I did not take him seriously for a moment. Indeed, I was already fearing for his reason. But automatically I raised my

eyes and let them travel slowly down the length of the long bench. I started with surprise when I saw a young woman standing at the far end. There was a smile on her lips. I did not look at her at all intently, for I did not want to rouse suspicions, but I had seen at once that she was beautiful. Her voice alone would have told me that.

"You really mustn't take everything Gougaloff says seriously, M. Borodin," she said.

I barely heard the words, for my attention was suddenly arrested by the unpredictable Gougaloff. He had undergone another of his swift changes and was retreating backwards to the door, with a look of abject terror in his eyes, which he kept fixed on the girl. Surely, the man was quite, quite mad!

"You can go, Gougaloff. You have my permission," she said mockingly; and came towards me.

He did not seem to need the permission. He was through the door in a flash, and I was alone with her—was it Malna he had called her?

"My father told me about you," she said. "I understand you are joining us and are going to lecture to-day at the Countess Melprise's. I am glad. My father needs help. You know how important the work is and how essential it is that we have money."

While she was speaking, I studied her—without rudeness, I hoped. Yes, she was certainly very beautiful. There was no denying it. And there was equally no denying the resemblance to her father. Her eyes were his eyes, though larger and more lovely. You could feel his presence when she looked at you.

"I understand," I replied, with intentional indifference. She could not terrify me as she did Gougaloff. "I shall do my best—you can count on that."

"I'm sure you will. My father thinks a great deal of you." She said it too quickly to convince me of her sincerity. "Gougaloff is jealous. He's jealous of everything—my father, me, our work, everything we do. He will probably be jealous of you before very long. I suppose he's told you he loves me?" She smiled faintly.

The question was a surprise, yet not entirely unexpected.

Already I was beginning to accept the abnormal as commonplace in this house. Malna Vardarma was as big an enigma as anyone or anything there. She was young—*younger* than I was; yet her pose was astonishing.

"He said something," I admitted; "but I did not quite follow him. In any case, I don't see that it's my business."

"You're quite right. It certainly isn't. If you bear that in mind in all things, we shall all be great friends."

"Thank you." These overtures were very flattering, yet they provoked me. "So long as my work is satisfactory, I shall not complain."

I could see I had not responded as she had wished, and I rather enjoyed the slight touches of rising temper that she showed. She grew more abrupt, although the smile on her lips did not fade.

"And you mustn't be so foolish as to fall in love with me," she said.

I could only gaze at her in amazement. There were no words I could use. She gave me no chance to answer, for by the time I had won back some of my composure, she was gone. For a moment or two I stood thinking over this, perhaps the oddest of all the odd encounters I had yet had in the Vardarma household; and then Gougloff came slinking back, very like the whipped dog to which Vardarma had likened him.

"I heard what she said," he said menacingly. "You see, it's started already—she is trying to torment me by making love to you. I understand it. But don't be a fool. Don't be caught as I was. Play with her if you like, but don't let her come near. She is trying to make me jealous, but she won't succeed."

"If you go on like that, I shall suspect she has already succeeded, Gougloff," I returned irritably. "Stop all this nonsense, this idiotic, adolescent love talk. If you ask me, she's a perfectly normal girl trying to keep your interest. She's got all the tricks of her sex and knows how to employ them, and you're a fool to take them all seriously."

"Just you wait," he replied darkly. "You wait until *you* take her seriously. You'll see."

"Oh, rubbish! Give me the notes. I'm going, and I want

to know what I have to do. What time am I due at the Countess's house?"

"Three." Without warning he slipped back into his moroseness. He thrust his hand out in front of him as though clearing an obstacle. "I'm sorry," he added, "but if you'd been through all I have, you'd understand me better." He gave me a notebook with a shiny black cover and a file. "Here are your notes. Good luck."

Chapter 8

THE LECTURE

LOOKED AT in cold blood, it was no easy matter to give a lecture on a cancer cure I did not understand, at only a few hours' notice. I must confess that, as I ate a frugal lunch, the prospect appalled me. But whatever other failings I may have, I have never suffered from stage fright; as I showed at Vardarma's lecture, I am always ready to have my say. It was because of this, I suppose, that the demonstration at the Countess Xavier de Melprise's salon went off without a hitch. Certainly it was not because I knew what I was talking about. However, enthusiasm lent wings to my words. I think I can say I spoke well and completely overcame the disappointment that the great doctor himself was unable to attend. Perhaps, too, my youth helped to make the audience sympathetic.

All this is not mere boasting. The wealthy and fashionable gathering applauded me from time to time when I made some specially telling point, and I could tell that it was not merely polite approval. I began to feel very satisfied with myself—almost as if I were the discoverer himself. I almost resented it when Dr. Vardarma was announced and the spotlight metaphorically shifted from me to him, leaving me in the darkness of neglect and forgetfulness.

I was anxious to hear what Vardarma might have to say about my performance, but he did not say much. I gathered, however, that he was well satisfied, for he told me I could take

the next day's demonstration entirely by myself; and as it was one for business men, I regarded this as a compliment. He stressed its importance, for the support of big business meant money and introductions to the right circles. I cannot remember the exact figure, but I believe I collected about a hundred thousand francs at that lecture. With conscious pride I laid the cheques on his desk with my own hands. I was glad to receive his nod of approbation; though once again he made no comment. Instead, he gave me particulars of my next appointment.

So it went on for a week or so, and I was beginning to feel that I was master of the job—a view that Vardarma encouraged me to believe in. He broke his silence of tacit approval and came out with some actual praise.

"You know," he said, "you really do it better than I do." He was quite jovial, and even his eyes smiled. I was properly sensible of the compliment he was paying me.

"Nonsense," I replied. "It just does itself. Everything is so foolproof that not even I could make a mess of it. By the way," I continued, "I had a request to-day. Someone wanted to see the patients you have in the clinic, and I said, of course, you'd be glad to show them. That was right, wasn't it?"

His face clouded, and his eyes—those barometers of his internal pressure—grew fierce.

"Weren't they satisfied with the written evidence of the doctors?"

"They were. But I mentioned your offer, as you told me to. I find it encourages people to be sympathetic. For instance, this Patient No. 2 with cancer of the stomach. I thought it would be a good idea . . ."

Vardarma checked me brusquely. "No. 2 has gone home," he snapped. "We shall have to show them the others."

"Very well." I did not see there was anything to be so irritable about. "It doesn't matter so long as we show them something. It struck me as being worth while, because there's talk of endowing a hospital and making you the head of it. That means security for the work and . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know. I've heard about it." His face wore a

puzzled expression such as I had never seen before. "You'd better get Grenant over here this afternoon. He's one of our best witnesses."

The people concerned had already seen Grenant and talked to him. I told Vardarma as much. "Why not one or two patients in the clinic?" I found myself saying. "They'd carry an immense amount of weight."

"Very well. You've promised, and we must keep to it." He seemed unusually undecided. "Send Gougaloff to me. He's in charge of the clinic, and he must make the arrangements. All right, you can go."

Once again that feeling of mystery which had so often come to me in this establishment descended on me. Gougaloff in charge of the clinic? It was the first I had heard of it. So far as I knew, he never went outside the laboratory during his hours of duty. Besides, he had no medical qualifications whatsoever; he was a chemist—and, I suspected, not much more than a hack chemist, a mere laboratory assistant, at that.

There was no need to call Gougaloff. He came into the room just as I was leaving, and I nodded to him. I had not seen him before that morning, since I had had an early demonstration and had gone there straight from my lodgings. He did not acknowledge my nod, but walked straight up to the desk, and I heard Vardarma telling me to shut the door.

There was no opportunity for me to think about it, however. As soon as I entered the laboratory, I was conscious of someone's presence—that odd awareness that does not seem to depend on physical sense stimulation. Indeed, I could be more specific; it was not merely someone, but Malna. She was in an elegant and simple tailored street suit, that somehow made her seem rather older.

"Ah, M. Borodin," she said smiling; "good afternoon—or is it still good morning?" Her voice was quiet, without its usual self-assurance. "I was wondering about something. My father cannot come to lunch to-day. Would you take me?"

I had lost my innocent air of surprise long ago, and I was curious to know what lay behind this unexpected invitation, put so directly.



"I should like to very much," I replied warmly. "That goes without saying. Yet I cannot help suspecting, *mam'selle*, that you honour me for some special reason?"

"It should be enough that I do honour you, *m'sieur*," she returned.

I bowed. Of course, it was self-evident. I looked at her with renewed interest. Yes, she was very beautiful. You could not put a label to it, though her beauty had a distinct character of its own. Some might have dismissed it as 'primitive,' but that was too easy. True, she had none of the easy graces or sophisticated polish of the Parisienne, but she had none the less grace and charm. One thing was certain; she was very proud of her corsetless figure. Its lines were firm and daring, and her arms had a habit of staying in one elegant posture long after the reason for that posture had passed. Yet she was not a poseur. She was confident of and with her body without being flagrant. Then there were her eyes. They had the same look of compulsion as her father's, as I have said before, but they were lighter and larger, a dark grey, with faint yellow rims near the pupil; they were hard and edged like thunderclouds. Only her mouth was imperfect; it was piteously small, incongruous in its setting of clear-cut features. When she spoke, however, it formed into a mocking smile that hid its disproportion—a smile insouciant and mischievous, malicious even.

No, I might have been prepared to describe Malna as the most perfect human animal I ever saw, but that, too, would be wrong. She was more than an animal, for her eyes, like her father's—I can never forget that similarity—spoke of depths and emotions one never sees in an animal. Malna, like everything else here, was an enigma, something that did not quite fit into the world as I knew it.

I did not know why I spent so much time analysing her. She was an attractive woman, and that should have been enough. Gougloff, with his crude sensibilities, could never understand her. By implication, of course, that meant that I did. I am not sure whether my self-confidence did not annoy her.

She did not speak as we walked to the street. Probably she was studying me as intently as I was studying her.

"You are not interested in women, are you?" she said, as we stepped into the taxi. But she did not wait for an answer. She ordered the driver to go to a smart restaurant in the Bois.

"Not all women," I said pointedly, when we had settled. I was sure the question was still in her thoughts.

"Am I all women?" she asked. It was a silly question, but I knew what she meant.

"You are like all women," I replied, accepting the challenge. "You like to fascinate. It is how women and snakes get their prey."

"Do you think so? Well, what would you think if I told you I did not care a damn about you, and that my father has asked me to take you out—for certain reasons?"

I refused to be taken aback. I had expected some unusual situation and here it was. Already I was becoming conditioned to the extraordinary.

"You wouldn't surprise me in the least," I answered. "I am not Gougaloff, who falls by instinct for your obvious beauty." Perhaps I was a little angry; I do not know.

She laughed merrily. Her whole face changed, and she became immensely happy and carefree. She stretched out her legs like a cat in front of the fire, so that I could hear her toes crack a little.

"You're quite refreshing," she said after a pause. "You have not yet been tamed. You even understand me a little, I think; and that's a very rare quality in men—understanding generally, I mean. You have no false concepts of me. I like that."

"As a matter of fact," I rejoined with intentional brutality, feeling that this was what she wanted, "I'm not sure I have any concepts of you at all."

"Yet you shudder when you think of me."

"Not at all. I am able to dismiss you from my mind even when you intrude upon it."

"You must dismiss me as something, surely? What is it—a common little *provocante*?"

"If I were to say 'yes,' it would not be true." She was forcing me to make definite statements. I could not escape behind a barrage of attempted epigram. "I would perhaps call you rather a *grande provocante*. Certainly, you have the manners of one. I don't know whether you carry your provocation to its logical conclusion, that's all. I suspect that, after a while, you become mean, avaricious of yourself and your feelings. In that case, you are, as you said, just a common *provocante*—but only in that case," I added with emphasis.

Malna smiled. "With the small, you have to behave meanly," she said with an insincerity so patent as to be charming. "With Gougaloff, for example. He is an insignificant fellow. I am certain he has told you many, many lies about me. I don't want you to believe anything he says."

"But I am to believe everything you say?"

"Not even that. I've asked you to come out with me so that I could explain a few things to you. That's all. The rest lies with you."

I tried to evade the issue. "I cannot understand why your father keeps Gougaloff," I said, trying to turn the subject.

"Because he knows the process—that is all. I mean, he knows how to work it, although he does not know the whole formula or anything really essential. As soon as my father has trained you, he will dismiss Gougaloff. You mustn't tell him, of course."

"I certainly shan't, though I think your father ought to. I shall feel very double-faced. He isn't such a bad fellow. A little nervy and with a grudge against mankind, but if he's treated well, he seems all right."

"You wouldn't think that if you knew. We tried treating him well, but it didn't work. He fell in love with me and began spreading rumours—filthy rumours. Hasn't he told you? I think he has. He was at it that day I first met you."

"Yes." I had to admit it. "I don't take him seriously, though. I'm working for your father and providing everything is correct I shall continue to do so. I enjoy the work. As for Gougaloff—well, he can be tolerated."

By now we had arrived at the restaurant, and I helped her

from the taxi. I remember the strange sensation her hand gave me as I did so. I remember particularly its softness—an appalling softness, like a rotten apple.

We ate in comparative silence, but whenever I chanced to look up I found her contemplating me. Her gaze vaguely irritated me and made me feel unsure of myself.

“Why do you look at me like that?” I asked at last. “Are you trying to hypnotize me? Are you trying to tell me something without using words or to put ideas in my mind? Or what?”

“Yes. You are right.” A sigh escaped her, and I smiled.

“A tiger purrs before a good meal,” I said. “Is that why you sighed?”

“No—for entirely different reasons; reasons you would not understand.”

My smile broadened. I felt very certain of myself again.

“There are other ways of creating curiosity.”

“Possibly. But all the same you *are* curious, aren’t you?”

“If I am supposed to be—yes.” I tried my best to be cynical. I was annoyed at my efforts, for my cynicism was obvious and a little cheap. She made no comment, but looked at me with surprising tenderness and sighed again. It was this look which confused me. I did not know whether to believe it or not.

“You are very unhappy, it seems to me, but you won’t admit it,” I said, trying to start a counter-offensive. “If I’ve been a little hard, please forgive me. You do not look like a person who invites sympathy.”

“Sympathy!” Her tone was vicious. “What is sympathy? Who wants your miserable little sympathy?”

“No one; certainly not you—I’m convinced of that. But it’s there for anyone to turn on, all the same. A tender look in the eyes, an unhappy girl—and before I know what I’m doing, I’m turning on the sympathy.”

My bitterness unnerved her a little, I think. “You know, I like hard people,” she said slowly. “They are usually much softer than the tender ones. It’s a paradox, but there it is, and you will understand the extreme. You’ve looked down abysses and wanted to jump in.”

"And you—" deliberately I played with my wineglass—"you have an uncomfortable habit of switching from one attitude to another. If you alternate much longer, I shall be dizzy. Is this your usual lunch pastime with helpless young men. I suppose in the end you reduce us so much that we don't know whether we love or hate you. I, for one, am certain that I don't hate you. I'm equally sure I don't love you. I am like Gougaloff."

She shuddered and put her hand on my sleeve.

"Don't!"

"You don't like him? Or rather, you don't like my putting it like that? But whose fault is it? Now, you'd better finish your dessert, as I must be getting back. I have an important interview at the clinic this afternoon. We might, if you feel inclined, continue our researches into Good and Evil some other time."

She did not reply, but continued to stare at me. Now and again I stared back. She would not frighten me with her ever-changing eyes that went from harshness to tenderness, bitterness to languor, as her thoughts changed. For that is what they did, those eyes; they changed with her thoughts. I imagined I could detect even a change of colour. But what her thoughts were, I could not guess, and I made no attempt to do so. I was determined not to be late for my three o'clock appointment. A lot depended on that, I thought. It did!

Chapter 9

IN THE CLINIC

VARDARMA HIMSELF greeted us when we returned.

"Had a good lunch?" he asked, but did not wait for a reply; he seemed to take it for granted. "Your friends are here, Borodin. You can show them patients one, four and five. Grenant is also here. Bring him in right at the end. I shall be with you later, after I've dispatched some urgent business. Malna, I want you in the study."

I made my way to the clinic and met Gougaloff, who was

talking to three doctors, whom I had already met at a demonstration, and to some business men.

Their purpose was evident, and they appeared anxious to begin; neither doctors nor business men ever have any time to spare; so I started without preamble. First, I produced the reports made by the various eminent doctors; these were trump cards. The substance of those reports was the same as the verbal testimony these men had made at that first eventful demonstration I had attended as a doubting Thomas.

My visitors were suitably impressed, but I knew that signed testimonials are always looked upon with suspicion by members of the medical faculty; these documents are produced in numbers far too large by proprietors of patent medicines. I did not linger over this stage, therefore, but hurried them into the wards, where they spoke with the patients themselves. All of these were nearing the end of their treatment and could, therefore, discuss their cases intelligently. I must say that their enthusiasm warmed my heart and made a visible impression on the visiting commission.

The only curious incident occurred when we came to Ward No. 2, where the patient with the stomach cancer had lain. Gougoloff went up to the door and laid his hand on the handle.

"Patient No. 2 is the most interesting of them all," he said. "I am sure these gentlemen would like to examine him."

"That's impossible," I returned. "No. 2 went home this morning, completely cured. We'll go on to No. 4—a very similar case to No. 2, and yielding very well to treatment."

I could not repress the thought that, if Gougoloff was in charge of the clinic, he did not know very much about it; but perhaps he had been too busy in the laboratory. Even then, surely Vardarma had told him?

There is little need to report this visit in detail. The three doctors and their attendant business men all seemed very well satisfied and they made glowing promises that they would do all they could to get Vardarma's treatment universally adopted. I was about to deliver a short homily on the need for funds, when Vardarma himself appeared; and, as always, immediately focused attention on himself. He chatted for a while with the

group and took them into his study; and I believe that he collected one or two very substantial cheques. Certainly there were some coloured slips of paper, very new looking and unfolded, on his desk when I came in later in answer to a summons.

"These medical gentlemen," said Vardarma, boring me with his eyes, "have honoured me with an invitation to the medical convention at Bordeaux in two weeks time. I am, of course, deeply sensible of the distinction they bestow on me, but I cannot go. As you know, I am conducting some critical experiments, and I cannot leave them. Our work must come before all thought of personal advancement. I have suggested, therefore, that you, as my right-hand man, could most satisfactorily and fittingly fill my place. After all, it is not fame I am seeking. Provided the faculty is made aware of our success, it is all that matters. The actual mouthpiece is of no consequence." He turned to the doctors, who stood in a little group together. "What do you say, gentlemen?"

"I'm sure we should all be very pleased to have M.—M. . . ."

"Borodin."

" . . . Borodin with us. Delighted, in fact. But, to be perfectly frank, we would much rather you yourself came. I have no doubt that M. Borodin is thoroughly conversant with your methods, but what we are interested in now is the background—you understand? You yourself, doctor, have made all the experiments. The work is yours. We should like to hear the fascinating story of your work from your own lips."

"That is very gratifying." Vardarma was looking very uneasy. "But I'm not sure that the time has yet come for that story to be told . . ."

"Oh come, doctor! We are all convinced of your results. None of us doubts them. You yourself promised that as soon as your proofs of results were accepted you would let us into the secret of the whole method. We can hardly be expected to recommend and adopt a method of which we are in complete ignorance as to details. Now this conference . . ."

"Some other time, gentlemen. It must take me some time to collate all my papers, and I cannot do it when I am still

experimenting. It must be either the whole story or none."

"You think it over, doctor. We'll get in touch with you next week. That will be time enough. In the meantime, we bid you adieu, and thank you and M. Borodin for a most instructive afternoon."

Vardarma made no comment when the party had left. He rang the bell for Gougaloff.

"I want you to get busy, Gougaloff," he snapped. "There has been too much idling. You must start to prepare some anti-toxin at once. I want at least a hundred cubic centimetres ready by to-morrow, as I am expecting new patients." He looked at me as though he had suddenly remembered me. "You can take the rest of the day off, Borodin. Now be off, both of you."

He picked up his pen and began writing furiously before we had time to reach the door.

Chapter 10

MY NEW FRIEND

I DID not even look at Gougaloff as we walked down the corridor, for I was busy with my own plans. I was tired, Malna had exhausted me mentally and the afternoon's visit had been tedious, with its repetition of the same questions and going over the same details several times. Vardarma's dismissal had come as a relief to me. I was thinking of a certain little restaurant where I could get away from it all, where even Grenant, who had now become associated in my mind only with the cancer cure, was not likely to intrude.

When Gougaloff clutched my arm, I started. I was annoyed, too, at having my train of thought so rudely interrupted.

"Yes?" I said crossly. And then I saw his face. It was seared with doubts and worries, like that of a man who faces a problem beyond his powers of solution—a problem that perhaps holds in it his life and death. "Why, what on earth's the matter?" I asked, repentant at once of my roughness. "You are in trouble?"

He tightened his hold on my arm. "Borodin," he said or, rather, gasped. "Don't go. Don't leave me. I have something important to say to you—really important. I've discovered something. It—it frightens me . . ."

"Hold on, old man," I replied. "Steady does it. Come along to the clinic. There's more privacy there." I thought of how Vardarma and Malna seemed to flit in and out of the laboratory unseen and unheard. No doubt Vardarma did it intentionally. But Malna? Was she his spy? I had almost said the word 'accomplice' to myself.

Gougaloff was lurching like a drunken man, and for a moment I eyed him suspiciously. Gougaloff sober was bad enough, but drunk . . . ! No; he was not drunk. He was in the throes of a great emotion, though whether fear or excitement I could not tell.

Adjoining the wards in the clinic was a small room, very rarely used. I had only discovered it myself by accident, and when I led Gougaloff to it he stared about him curiously as though he had never seen it before. I settled him on one of the hard wood chairs with which it was furnished and perched myself on the edge of the table. Thus, I was at a higher level and better able to deal with him if he showed signs of getting unruly.

"Listen, Borodin," he began thickly. "Listen. I know the truth. Do you know why you could not show those people No. 2?"

I gazed at him perplexedly. Surely he was quite mad? Of course I knew the reason. I had it from Vardarma's own lips. That patient had been dismissed, cured. What had bitten this strange fellow now?

"No. 2 was discharged," I said coldly. "There's nothing in that. We ought to be glad of it. One more complete cure to set beside Grenant."

"Ah! That's what he told you—what he wanted you to believe. But I know the truth. I'll tell you. The patient died."

"Died? You must be crazy, Gougaloff. Why, I saw him only two days ago, and he looked perfectly well to me. I wasn't a bit surprised to hear he'd been discharged."

"I don't know anything about that. But I do know that he's dead now. Listen, Borodin—it's the truth I'm telling you. I'll take my oath on it. *They—all—die.*" He stressed each of the last three words by thumping on his knee.

"You're mad."

He looked sullen. "I tell you all Vardarma's patients die. He takes them from the poor hospitals claiming to be able to cure them, and then after three weeks he sends them back saying they're beyond him."

"But why hasn't he been found out?" The whole thing was ridiculous. "Everyone believes in him. If he did anything like that . . ."

"He's too clever, Borodin. He's a fiend. You see, he is definitely able to cure them—but only for three weeks. Then it all comes back again, often worse than before. He's on the track of a cure all right, I grant you that. But it goes wrong somewhere. Just when you think recovery's complete, the patient dies. I know it, Borodin. I've seen it."

"You've seen it?"

He nodded firmly. "Yes. I followed the whole course of No. 2's case. It was marvellous the way he pulled round—and then"—he snapped his finger—"pff! just like that."

I could not doubt his sincerity now. I had given my word to Vardarma and Malna not to take Gougaloff seriously, but for all that I could not disbelieve him. I had never seen him so earnest. Moreover, the very weight of his discovery seemed to be too much for him. He was a man bearing a terrific burden.

Let me confess that at that moment I never thought of the ethics of the case. I had not a moment to spare for No. 2 and the other patients who, it seemed, had been snatched from the jaws of death only to be cast back again. I thought only of my own punctured pride. Yes, I, the sceptic had been convinced, only to find that my original doubts had been well founded. It was humiliating. Nothing Vardarma could have done could have humiliated me more.

"Then he's a charlatan after all!" I broke out. Gougaloff checked me.

"Not quite. He has got something. He's on the road."

"That may be; but it's quackery to claim you can cure people completely when you can't." I brooded for a moment. This made clear so much—Vardarma's reluctance to let the doctors see the patients, his almost point-blank refusal to attend the medical conference. The thought that while I was showing those doctors round, there was a dead body waiting to give its evidence, made my face redden with shame. Still, one failure was no more convincing of complete lack of success than one cure was conclusive the other way. "Surely he has had some successes?" I asked.

Gougaloff shook his head. "No. If the cancer infection is slight, Vardarma refuses to give an injection. He knows very well that he'll kill the patient with it—though God knows how many poor devils had to die to teach him that lesson. It cures and kills at the same time—that's the fiendish paradox of it. He waits till his patients are absolutely incurable—dying, in fact—before he injects them. Their recovery is astonishing, and Vardarma gives his demonstrations so that doctors can testify that the incurable has been cured. They're right. What they don't know is what happens afterwards."

Gougaloff was very sure of himself. I more than half believed him. But I thought also that he was Gougaloff, a man with a grudge, a man full of jealousy, as Malna had said, and therefore liable to see things that didn't exist or distort things he did see. I had heard the type of slander he could spread if he had a mind to it. Perhaps this, too, was one of his tricks.

"But what about Grenant?" I demanded. "He's been completely cured, hasn't he? How do you get round that?"

"I can't and don't. I can only say that I know nothing about him, though I have my suspicions. He's a friend of yours, so you ask him. I've only spoken to him when Vardarma's been about. Think of it, Borodin—isn't it suspicious that your Grenouille, as you call him, is the only *living* witness Vardarma can produce. All the others are said to be cures in progress. No. 2's been discharged, cured, you say. Well, where is he? Will he be coming to your demonstration next week? No, Borodin—not unless you have him embalmed and show him in a glass coffin as a testimony to your wonderful work."

I did not know what to say. If Gougaloff was right. . . ! But how could he be till he had explained Grenouille to me—Grenouille, who had stood up time and again before eminent doctors and men of affairs testifying unflinchingly to his recovery, his marvellous salvation? It was better not to be hot-headed. I resolved to keep my eyes open and to go on as before. The truth must emerge—if it was anything like Gougaloff's representation of it.

I was about to make some remark when the bell in the corridor rang. The bells were all interconnected, so that wherever we might be, whether in laboratory or clinic, we should not miss the summons of our employer.

Great beads of perspiration stood out on Gougaloff's brow.

"It's Vardarmal" he said, panting. "He's been into the lab. and found I'm not there. He'll kill me. You mustn't say a word—a word. I beg of you. Not a word."

"Of course not. At the moment, Vardarma butters my bread as well as yours." If he liked to think I was there for purely mercenary reasons, well and good; and he would not have been far from the truth. Still he sat on, wringing his hands. "Hadh't you better go?" I suggested gently.

"No, no—I can't." His face was white. "You go. He'll suspect everything if he sees me like this."

I nodded and made my way rapidly to the study. Gougaloff was quite hopeless. As I left him his lips were moving, as though he was uttering some malediction. There would be some explaining for me to do anyway, and I was not looking forward to it. Where was Gougaloff? I would be asked. I would reply that he was ill, that I had seen to him, that he would be all right in a little while—in the meantime, what could I do for the doctor? Yes; that must be my line.

But to my surprise, the doctor was not there. Malna was sitting at her father's desk, looking busily through some papers. I advanced with an air of surprise.

"I thought the doctor rang," I said.

"He has gone out. He will not be back to-day." Her voice suddenly became accusing. "You have been with Gougaloff, haven't you? You see, I know."

"You do not need to be clairvoyant to know that, Mademoiselle Vardarma. We work together."

Characteristically, she changed at once.

"Must you always call me 'mademoiselle'? I have no official position here. I only help with the correspondence sometimes, and I am not very good at that. Perhaps you do not like my name—Malna? Does the *mal* worry you? Is it the evil you fear?"

"Not at all." I was being very stiff. "The *mal* is pure irony in one so gentle and soft."

She laughed to herself and put her hands behind her neck. Her breasts seemed to tilt forward, falling over the desk as she moved her body forward.

"You know," she said softly, "you provoke me. There is something I fear in you—and fear is a dangerous and delicious sensation."

"You fear me?" I did not attempt to disguise my pleasure at the news—a fatal mistake with a woman of Malna's perception.

"Oh, not like that. Don't flatter yourself. I am only afraid that you are afraid of me."

"Well turned—very well turned. Is that why you called me to this study? Did you feel under a compulsion to tell me that? Have I your father's permission to waste my time?"

I realized my error, but it was too late. Malna stooped like a hawk to her quarry.

"You're not wasting your time, George. You were given the afternoon off—so I heard him say, at least. So if it's waste of time, it's not his time and he doesn't come into it."

"Then how did you know I was here?" I asked suspiciously. Had she heard anything? I did not see how she could. Those Vardarmas were odd people, but they hardly had the power of being in two places at once.

She laughed. "What a suspicious person you are! I didn't know you were here. I rang the bell and thought Gougaloff would come—but you did instead. However, you'll do. You can do what I want just as well. In fact, I prefer it to be you. He might have tried to kiss me as we should have been alone."

I glanced at her and withdrew a little. "Perhaps he understands more about these things than I do."

She ignored the remark in her new mood of business-like efficiency.

"I've a letter here to answer. Father received it a few moments before he went out. It is from Thevin—the man you knew as Patient No. 2."

"No. 2?" I said quickly.

"Yes. Is there anything surprising in that? It would have been more surprising if he had not written. He just reports that he has arrived home safely and is feeling fine. It takes me hours to think of the right words. Will you do it for me? You know the sort of thing to write."

She passed a half sheet of notepaper towards me and pointed to a typewriter.

"I can't type," I said, my mind working furiously, wondering whether I had walked into a trap. "I'll write by hand. Just a few words?"

"Yes. Here, come and sit at the desk. I'll get another chair."

She rose from the swing chair that Vardarma used and waved me into it. While I settled myself, she crossed to the wall and fetched another chair, which she set down close to mine. As I prepared to write she watched me closely. Her breast was against my arm. I could feel her presence; indeed, I could not escape it. She was too far away to suggest intimacy, yet she was too near for my peace of mind. My arm was cramped as I wrote, but I did not ease it lest she should feel the pressure and imagine something.

At last it was done. I have never taken so long to write so few words.

"Here," I said, "it's done. Will you sign it or shall I?"

"Your name will do. It doesn't matter. You know the patient and he will know who it is." She reached out for the blotter and, as she did so, her hand crossed mine. I glanced quickly at her face; it was serene and purposeless. But her hand remained on mine, and she was very still.

"Is that all?" I asked awkwardly. "I had better be going."

In confusion I added: "Unless there's anything else you want from me?"

She did not speak immediately, nor did she release my hand. Her fingers dug into my palm, twisting them gently as if in a caress, and as her fingers moved so did her body, sinuously, nearer and nearer, until her breath came upon my mouth. Now I was still.

"You hate me," she said in a distant tone. "I know you hate me. It is the *mal* in my name."

Suddenly she became like a pleading child. Her eyes showed her weakness, and her hand sagged.

"I don't like the way you are playing with me," I replied quietly, and without rancour. "And I'm sorry for Gougaloff. He loves you so much."

"*Ca marche toujours comme ca . . .* One loves and is not loved in return." It was half sigh, half whisper.

"Love? How much do you know of love?" I was rather supercilious, perhaps, but my mind was in a whirl. I could not piece things together. There was Malna's conduct—was it genuine or just a way to idle away half an hour? And the letter I had just written to Patient No. 2—what did that mean? Gougaloff said he was dead. It was absurd, and I was fool ever to have believed it. He was lying again. But foremost was Malna. I found myself responding to her against my better judgment. Her voice came to me as from a distance, as though it was cleaving a way through my thoughts; and I was surprised at the childish sincerity in her voice.

"You are right to laugh at me, George," she said. "I have never really known any love. I love my father—but that is different. I have loved animals—but never men—a man."

I looked at her. She put her head on my shoulder.

"You are a strange creature," I remarked. "You have a way of being inappropriately appropriate." The jingle of words amused me. They banished my stupor and made me aware of the reality of my sitting there with her head on my shoulder. "I'm not an animal," I ran on, for the sake of saying something. "But I'll stroke you, if you like. Are you so hungry for a caress?"

She moved her cheek against my face without speaking. Her body was doing all the talking—languidly and eloquently, but I was conscious all the time that behind its languor was strength always—strength ready to strive for mastery.

"You are so full of doubts," she said softly at last. "It's wrong to be hurt for so long. And you are hurt, you know. I can feel it. I feel that some woman has hurt you in the past and you can't forgive her. I've hurt you, too, a little."

"And to complete the platitude," I returned, imitating her, "oughtn't you to say that I love her who hurt me?"

"You are afraid to. You live on phrases. If they are platitudinous, you avoid life. Why don't you say you love me and let me say I love you—and leave it at that?"

I pushed her away from me, but the sight of her eyes filling with tears made me seize her roughly by the shoulders; and before I could explain my action to myself, her mouth was near my mouth, her lips on my lips.

"That's what you get for being a silly little girl," I said, with a show of bravery. "But that's all."

Again she moved her mouth to mine. The child was still in her face; her eyes were glistening softly with the unshed tears that hid beneath her lashes. I kissed her again and again until she wept.

"So," I said tenderly, "my kisses are as bitter as all that?"

"The first kisses are always bitter. Especially when they are hate kisses." The last words seemed to probe me.

"What do you mean?"

I was startled. Was it all an illusion after all? back to her repartee, to those sharp words that sent me into a sting.

"You kissed me because you were sorry for me. Kisses of sorrow are hate kisses. I was without sorrow or reproach. I began with tormenting you—and you succeeded in turning me. You are sorry for it. I don't want you to be so sorry that you kiss me with love, and love only."

"I suppose you are right. I knew you were sorry for it, but I don't now, because I

She laughed happily. "I'm so glad—so glad. I thought you were as heartless as I was, and you're not. You're weak underneath."

"So you're despising me now?" I was surprised, yet I was ready for almost any change in this incalculable woman.

"And that shows you do not really believe me. If you did, you wouldn't say such a thing. Of course I don't despise you. I admire you. You are not afraid of showing your weakness. People who are very strong can do that. I can. I am strong—so I can afford to say I love you, because although it hurts I can bear it. I can sacrifice my pride and mock at myself. We are both strong so we do not need to test ourselves any further. You understand? You must."

"Nearly. But you are so perverse. You can turn a contradiction into a truth so easily. I envy you for that."

She eyed me with a slight smile. "And what is the greatest contradiction?"

"The fact that out of our fear and hatred for each other, love has come."

She shook her head. "That is not a contradiction. If we had begun from the other end—if we had started by loving each other, we should have finished in hating each other. It is better to go out of the darkness into light. Something will always remain of our love now."

"You say that very sadly."

"Our love must be sad. It is like the first kiss you gave me—full of forgiveness and sorrow. When that is over, you will be able to love me properly."

I nodded and signed to her to be silent. I had heard a noise at the door. Quickly she parted from me and began a frantic, but unconvincing, search among the papers.

But it was not her father. It was Gougloff. He entered without knocking. For a moment or two he stood like a bull about to charge, with his head lowered and his eyes full of fiery resentment. Instinctively I braced myself for a savage onslaught. But the attitude of bellicosity passed. His face curled into a scathing sneer.

"I might have known," he said, and there was a torturing

bitterness in his voice. "You are on their side. You are another hired soul. Did they buy you with money—or did Malna give you her kisses? You are the biggest fool I have ever met, Borodin. You are so brave and so weak. Pahl! Money and kisses—money or kisses. I had them both."

He slammed the door.

Malna turned to me quickly. "You don't believe him?" she said quickly. "We never gave him any money, beyond his salary, and I have never kissed him. I could not." She shuddered.

"I believe you," I replied soberly. "He's a man with a standing grievance. Don't worry about it. I can settle him once and for all. Please don't worry."

She kissed me again.

"I knew you would understand in the end," she said simply. "He is jealous. Men behave strangely when jealousy grips them. Now I think you had better go. Father may be back, though I don't think so, but it's better to be safe. He'd better not know anything about us just yet. Go now. I'll come to you this evening. I have your address."

I cannot remember leaving the room. My head was swimming with thoughts that never held their shape for more than a moment. Life had suddenly taken on a new and exciting colour for me.

Chapter II

MISS MALNA

It was Gougloff who brought me back to the reality of my surroundings. Of course, I ought to have expected it, but I had forgotten all about him. He was waiting for me in the corridor—I had almost said like a cat outside a mousehole, but that would have been grossly incorrect. A cat remains calm and alert, with all its faculties concentrated, ready to pounce and kill. Gougloff was anything but calm; his faculties were disordered. He was trembling all over and there was a glitter

in his eyes that made me once again fear for his sanity. But he pounced all right. No sooner had I emerged than he seized me by the arm and swept me into the laboratory, where for a time that seemed interminable he stared at me, half mockingly, half derisively.

"So you have joined them," he sneered. "You're a fine one. I tell you the truth, which I found out at enormous risk—and then you go over to them."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I retorted. His manner annoyed me. It was not that I resented what he said so much as his treatment of me. What man, fresh from the first kisses of his beloved, would like to be swept away and lectured? I did not even want to argue with him.

"So I don't know! You'd believe Malna's words and kisses before the evidence of your own eyes. She's . . ."

"Leave Malna out of it, you cur," I snapped. My temper was at breaking point.

"Like that, is it? I see. I'm a fool to take any notice of you. How much did you tell her—about me?"

"Nothing. We had something else to discuss." I said this deliberately, intending to wound him. He only gaped at me.

"I can understand that. I'll believe you—but remember to keep your mouth shut. You may have joined the murderers, but I haven't. You'd better be careful. Nothing will stop me now I know."

"I don't know what you're driving at, but you're making a lot of silly statements. What about Grenant, eh? You yourself admitted you didn't know."

He eyed me disparagingly. "They've squared you, haven't they? Why shouldn't they have squared Grenant? They don't mind what price they pay, so long as they get what they want. With Grenant, perhaps, it's money. With you, it's Malna's body. It's all coin to them."

"Don't be so filthy." I was doing my best to keep myself in check. I really thought him mad. "You can't prove any one of those statements you made to me. They are lies—lies."

"Oh?" He glanced at me quickly, suspiciously. "How do you know that? Does Malna—virtuous little Malna—say so?"

"For the last time," I hissed, almost choking in my efforts to restrain myself from knocking him down, "leave her out of it. If you must know, Vardarma had a letter this very day from Patient No. 2, who announced his safe arrival home. Corpses don't write letters."

"Do you know that's true?"

"I have seen the letter."

"Oh!" He seemed temporarily disconcerted. "They're getting very confidential, aren't they, when they show you patient's letters like that. It almost looks as though they wanted you to believe something. I should have been suspicious if they had done that to me."

"It was only chance the letter wasn't shown to you." I had not meant to reason with him, but it seemed the only thing to do. "When that bell rang, it was meant for you. Mademoiselle Vardarma . . ."

"*'Mademoiselle Vardarma,'*" he mimicked. "I'm not a servant."

" . . . wanted some assistance in writing the reply," I went on, unperturbed. "She expected you would be able to help her. She had no idea I was in the house—you may remember she heard her father give me the rest of the day off, and but for you and your crackpot stories I should have gone."

"Oh!" This seemed to have sobered him a little. "So you believe that? She has eyes and ears everywhere, that witch. She heard everything. She knows what I said to you, fool that I am. If I had gone she would have tormented and humiliated me into silence. I know, I know. You can't know what they find out. So I was to answer the letter. Did you do it?"

I nodded. "Of course."

He studied me with wide-open eyes in which that unnatural glitter was still bright.

"You've written a letter to Patient No. 2?" he asked, like a stunned man.

"Yes. I've said so, haven't I?"

He broke into the most horrible laugh I have ever heard.

"Oh, that's good, that's good. It's rich." The tears chased down his cheeks. "Here's a man, almost a doctor, who writes

polite little notes to a cadaver." Suddenly he grew quiet and his lips curled like a snarling animal. "You fool, you fool!" he hissed. "Get out of my sight."

Chapter 12

A JEALOUS RUSSIAN

I DID not consider my dignity. I left that house just as quickly as I could. It seemed to hold all things for me, paradise and hell, good and evil; it was like a magnet, one pole of which attracted me irresistibly, while the other repulsed me with a force no less strong. When this image occurred to me, it pleased me. I extended it. Malna was one pole, the attractive one, Gougloff the other, the repulsive one; while Vardarma was the dynamo that energized them both. I knew, even at that moment, that it was Vardarma who was responsible for everything. Perhaps, after all, Malna and Gougloff and the patients were only projections of his powerful thoughts. Philosophers have played with the notion and romantic novelists have used it. It is like a disturbing dream. You know it is unreal, yet all the time you are aware it might be true. Even I myself might be only a figment of Vardarma's brain. . . .

But these disordered thoughts soon deserted me. After all, I was, I think, a perfectly normal young man; and in view of what had happened there was only one thing that could occupy my attention for long. Thing? No—person. That person, of course, was Malna. I soon forgot all about Gougloff, and Patient No. 2, even the reason for my being in Vardarma's house at all.

I fell to analysing my feelings; they tell me that is a luxury to which we Russians are so prone as to make it a vice. I do not care. If it is a luxury, then let me admit that I like luxury. The dominant thought was one of curious expectancy over her promised visit that evening. She had suggested it herself, and in my usual way I had been too flabbergasted to make any reply.

I was frankly astonished at her, and no less at myself, for the speed and naturalness of my reactions towards her. I believed her implicitly, and I was moved by her tenderness, unexpected as it was. Nothing had been forced between us. We had started by play-acting to each other and broken through to sincerity. We had, indeed, fought each other's personalities and instead of drawing apart had come together.

Let me tell you, if you have never experienced it, that there is a deliciousness in such situations that is all the more pleasing because it is unexpected. I felt like a man who had suddenly come across a gold mine in the middle of the Champs Elysées; and as I walked down that happily named avenue, I had the Spring in my feet, though Spring was long since passed. A great unbounded love for everything sprang up in me. Little things began to appear strange and beautiful. I looked into people's eyes as they passed me, trying to discover whether they held the same tenderness as Malna's.

I was good humour itself. Nothing could irritate me now, not even the milling crowds in the *Metro*. I was curious and unnaturally receptive, willing to participate in anything that happened around me. It was a joy to help the slightly intoxicated old flower woman with her basket and to listen to the vitriolic abuse of a Parisian taxi-driver, even though it was directed at me for a piece of jay-walking that was outrageous even for Paris. My head was full of realized dreams, and yet my body held a pleasant lethargy, as though I had had a pleasant hot bath.

They say that lovers have no time for food, but so far as I am concerned that is a lie. I was conscious of a consuming hunger—a craving for all the good things that a French chef could provide. I thought I would enjoy this luxury as much as possible, for I have always found the anticipation of a good meal more aesthetically satisfying than the meal itself, and drop into my favourite *bistro* before I went to have some dinner.

And there I found Grenant. I had not seen much of him lately—socially, that is. He had become a part of my demonstration, like the highly coloured slide of the microbe; and no lecturer feels any real affection for the chalk he uses for his

blackboard. He was sipping a liqueur with the satisfied air of a man who has had a good dinner. I tempted him to another drink, just for the sake of having someone to talk to, though I knew that, sooner or later, the conversation would veer round to startling discoveries.

"Hullo," I cried, warmly striking him on the back. "What are you up to? Come and have a spot of food with me and tell me something startling. I'm in the mood."

He choked a little, for my slap on the back had caught him in the act of swallowing, and then looked at me with round, startled eyes.

"This is the first time you've ever invited me to talk to you," he said. "At any rate, the first time for ages. What's come over you?"

"I'm happy," I said with the simplicity of great truth.

"Ah-ha!" He clutched the glass I had ordered for him and raised his eyebrows.

"No, just happy and no 'ah-ha' about it. Come on—let's eat a lobster at Chez Georges."

Another man might have protested that he had already dined. But not Grenouille—I did not expect him to.

"Your happiness is easy to deduce," he said with mock solemnity, as we walked along together. "It arises from one of two things: either you've come into a fortune, or you're in love."

"Perhaps you're right, but I'll leave it to you to decide which, as you're so perceptive to-night. I'm more interested in you. What have you been doing with yourself, apart from the demonstrations? Attending lectures? Still qualifying to be one of Vardarma's assistants?"

His face clouded and grew serious. "Fact is, I'm not sure medicine is my line." Well, I thought, he should know by now; but what new bug has bitten him? "I'm taking Egyptology."

This was certainly a new departure. I pressed him for details. In the expressive cant phrase, I asked for it.

"You've no idea how clever those old Egyptians were. Now, they made some startling discoveries, if ever anyone did."

"All right. Tell me." I beckoned to the waiter and ordered the meal.

"It's so much, I hardly know where to begin. Gunpowder, for instance."

"I thought it was the Chinese who discovered gunpowder."

"Chinese as well," he conceded, his small plump hands—how like frog's hands they were!—already plucking at the lobster, just as though he had not had a meal for days. "But it's not important. Medicine, now—ah, medicine! That's where they made some really startling discoveries. In fact, it was through that that I came to take up Egyptology."

"Medicine, eh? And surgery, too, I believe?" I was amused at the eagerness with which he took me up.

"Brilliant in that." His eyes glowed, though I doubt whether his professor himself had ever come across any complicated surgery. "Priests and people like that knew all about it. Stomach resections, even. Just think of it—they were cutting open stomachs and extracting weapons and things without any anaesthetic, so far as we know. That's the point. So far as we know. I think they had drugs and other means of putting their patients to sleep. For instance, they knew a lot about hypnosis, though we're only just beginning to understand its uses. . . ."

I let him run on, though I paid no conscious attention. A curious idea had come into my mind, born partly of his ramblings and partly out of my own recent experiences. Gougaloff, whom I had wished to dismiss utterly from my mind, came back. He had called me a hired soul, confound him—and he had classed Grenant with me, suggesting that this pathetic brachian creature had been bought. It was absurd, of course, and yet . . .

Under the guise of absorbed interest, I studied Grenant closely. I tried to discover whether his appearance suggested that he had ever suffered from cancer. I had done it before, of course, but I believed now that I had more experience. The disease, even when it has been cured by operation, leaves the skin in a peculiar condition. Yet Grenouille's skin seemed perfectly healthy.

Naturally, it must be, I argued. Vardarma's cure strikes at

the root of the whole business. There was no reason at all why Grenant's skin should show any of the characteristic traces, such as the peculiar pallor.

"Grenouille," I said suddenly, breaking into his discourse unmercifully. "Tell me, when did you meet Vardarma?"

He stared at me. "Oh, some months ago. I told you." He was vague and jocose. "But as I was saying, the Egyptians are believed to have filled teeth . . ."

"When did you find out you had cancer?"

"Oh, I say," he complained, "don't interrupt like this. You're breaking the thread of my thoughts. Cancer? Why, yes, of course, I had it a year or two before I met Vardarma. He's wonderful, you know. Cured me in three weeks. Injections in the thigh . . ."

His voice had taken on the sing-song tunc he used when making his statement to audiences.

"I know all about that," I rejoined impatiently. "Haven't you testified to it over and over again in my hearing? Haven't I asked you to? When was that?"

"When was what?"

"When you met Vardarma."

"Two months ago—or was it three? I don't know."

I checked my start of surprise. This certainly did not agree with Grenant's public testimony.

"And that was the first time you'd set eyes on him?"

"Yes, of course. Hasn't he told you?"

His face was crinkled in annoyance. I had upset him by my persistence just when he was so well set on his Egyptological flights. I was suddenly struck by an odd thing. I had been using Grenouille in my demonstrations—dozens of them—and really I knew no more about his case than what I had heard from his own lips; I was no better off or better informed than the hundreds of people who, by now, had listened to the story in salons and lecture halls and board-rooms.

Once again I thought of Gougaloff, though I cursed him for intruding so insistently into my thoughts. I told myself that I must test his words once and for all, though something told me

that if I were honest I should have admitted I wanted to prove Malna.

"Listen, Grenouille," I said quietly, trying to fill my voice with subtle understanding, "you don't need to be afraid of me. Vardarma's told me everything—everything, understand. You see?"

I picked up the bottle of Rhone du Pape and said, lightly: "More wine?"

He eyed me for a moment and whistled. "So? Like that, is it? You're in with him. Nice and thick, eh? Well, I thought you would be. You're the sort that gets on."

I was not sure I liked these intended compliments. They unsteadied me a little.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my pulse rising.

"What do *you* mean?" he returned cunningly. My excitement had undone me. I had baited my trap very badly—or perhaps there wasn't any quarry to walk into the trap. I decided I would be honest with Grenouille, who had drunk my wine and eaten my lobster and treated me to so much interesting talk on Egyptology. I would give him an honest lie and see how he reacted.

"I mean this," I said, slowly turning the wine bottle in my hands. "Vardarma has told me about your exhibition. I had to know as I've been using it, see. You never had cancer, did you? But it was a good idea, anyway. The marvellous thing about Vardarma's cure is that it does work—for a while. Hal! It was lucky for you or you'd have been dead after three weeks." I was repeating all Gougaloff's slanders as though they were true. "Still, there's something in it, isn't there?" I grinned knowingly.

"There certainly is. And there ought to be a lot more. Vardarma's been pretty mean to me. Listen, Borodin, I've been thinking. I didn't know you knew so much, or I'd have said something before."

"Well?" After my heat, I had grown suddenly cold. Gougaloff was right, then! He had guessed the truth about Grenant, and if that, then what about the rest of it? I shuddered. I seemed to feel Malna's arms stretching out to me, her lips on

my cheek, and her voice whispering in my ear: "I want you to believe me."

"I've been thinking about you and me," Grenant hinted. "He'd be frightened of us together. He doesn't care a jot about me, of course—says he could have me taken away to a lunatic asylum if I so much as whispered a word. But with you, it's different. You're in with him—all the world knows it from the demonstrations. How about it?" He leaned confidentially across the table. "We could screw him up to half a million francs. He's got money all right. I've seen his cheques; they pour in, apart from those you collect for him. And what do I get? What do you get?"

He thought he was playing on my cupidity. I let him think so; he might as well think that as anything else.

"A miserable two thousand a month," I replied.

"You see? And you do all the donkey work and take the risk by appearing in public. We must concoct a plan. You and I—we must approach him to-morrow." He paused with a crafty look; he obviously fancied himself as a conspirator and big crook. "But we ought to write a letter and leave it somewhere, just in case."

"In case of what?" I asked in alarm.

"He might do something. That man is dangerous—you can see that. He's a ruthless swindler, Borodin—not like me. He plays big fish. Now I've never had the chance, but let it pass. He's dragged me into it and you into it, and he ought to pay." He took the bottle from me—I had still kept turning it in my hands—and drained out the last drops into his glass. "He might shoot us or poison us," he added. "Anything. We must be careful."

I decided to humour him. I was getting at something now, though even now I was not sure of my real attitude. Grenant had admitted, almost in as many words, that he was not averse to crooked dealing. Besides, he loved dramatizing himself, and I might have put the whole idea into his frog's head. But we settled down, there and then, to working out a programme of action. The day was to be Monday. To-morrow we ruled out because it was a Sunday, and it was too soon, anyway. I

agreed to write a letter and leave it with someone to open if no news was received from me within forty-eight hours. Then we parted. There was a conspiratorial air about Grenant that I am sure would have roused the suspicions of any intelligent policeman if it hadn't been accompanied by so much clear stupidity.

And I—I went home to wait for Malna. She was so late that I began to despair of her coming. But the wait was good for me. I was able to sort out my thoughts. I told myself I had been a fool, a damned fool. But what worried me was Malna's real position in the whole affair. I did not really care if Vardarna was the greatest of living criminals. I did not care if Grenant was a petty swindler. I did not care if Gougloff became a murderer. All that mattered was Malna's sincerity. Her coming would, I felt, be in some mystic way a proof of it, though reason told me it might as well be that she did not know how much I knew. The hands of the clock moved on, and my doubts grew.

Chapter 13

RUE VISCONTI

SHE CAME at last. I heard the taxi in the street below and her voice: "*C'est rue Visconti? Combien?*"

I resisted the leaping urge to rush downstairs to greet her. It was better she should ring and the concierge let her in. The good lady might be a little surprised by my near-midnight visitor, for I was not in the habit of receiving ladies so late at night in my apartment. But beyond that, and perhaps a thought that I had gone the way of all flesh, she would say nothing, and a tip in the morning would brush away her last doubts.

I heard Malna's footsteps on the stairs. My light was out—intentionally. I pretended to be asleep. The door opened and she came in.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Malna."

"Ah, Malna." I switched on the bedside lamp. "I did not think you would come."

"I said I would. I have been kept late by my father. We have been putting our correspondence in order."

"Going away?"

"No. We are very bad correspondents. We let it pile up and then do it once in a while. But it is as well to be prepared—to have everything shipshape."

My pulse beat faster.

"You see, father does not know when he might be called to America. He has received a lot of publicity there. If he goes, he hopes you will go with him."

"And you, Malna—you would go, too?"

"Yes."

"Then my answer, too, is yes. Come and sit down. Will you have a drink? I've some Jamaica rum."

"Do you drink that?" she asked innocently. "I thought only pirates and *roués* drank rum."

"It's a good drink. It makes one very bold."

She laid her hat and her handbag on the foot of the bed. I sensed a perfume.

"And you say you have been working," I said slyly. "You've got perfume on."

"Oh, that! I went home for supper and dressed. I thought you might take me out somewhere to-night. We might go to some little *boite* where I could nestle to you and we could dance sometimes. I'm certain you know plenty in the Quartier."

"I do," I confessed. I looked ruefully at my dressing-gown. "But if you insist, I'm game. Come to think of it, I'd like to go somewhere gay to-night after all these surprises."

"Oh, darling!" It was not the words or the way she said them that startled me; it was the realization that this was the first time she had used a term of endearment. She put her two hands on my shoulders and drew up her breast to me. "Surprises?" she asked. "Has anything happened since we parted?"

"Nothing much. I have been making discoveries in myself—that's all. Perhaps there will be some more."

She laughed gently. I did not quite understand her mood. She was quiet.

"Do you want something to happen?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure. No, I hope not. Everything has such an air of uncertainty, and I wouldn't destroy it by doubting."

"Oh, *quel Russe!*" she exclaimed. "You're already torturing yourself, always going back to enjoy your doubts. Here I am. I've come to you, and I'm ashamed. I've never done this before. Yet you treat me as if I were a white dove going to the sacrifice, instead of as a woman—a woman who loves you."

"I suppose I do. Yes, I know I do. I wonder whether you have all the perfidies, all the tricks, all the tears and pettiness of women."

I was bitter—I do not know why; and it angered Malna. She went to the bed and picked up her bag and hat.

"George," she said in an even voice, through which I could feel her surging emotion, "I did not expect this. I thought you loved me."

"I do," I replied gently, more gently than I either intended or meant. I could not tell her what I had found out, though I burned to do so. What had it to do with her? I asked myself savagely. "What would your love look like if it lied?"

She did not grasp my underlying meaning, and she misunderstood me.

"It would not come here with a smile and open arms. It would be sly and suspicious, like you, George, not open and trusting. Now you know. I am going home. I am sorry."

"No, no," I cried desperately. "Tell me just one more thing." I paused, a little ashamed of my earnestness. "If there was something hidden between us—some lie, great or small—you would tell me if you knew it was a lie, wouldn't you?"

"That's an involved question, and I don't think you understand it yourself. I've told you I love you. If I go on repeating it and getting sophistries in reply, I shall hate it. You don't understand love, George. You live in a world of words and luxuriate in your feelings. That isn't love. Love is not saying: 'I love you'; it's not kisses and embraces. No, George, it's a way of living. Perhaps you will never understand that." She made an impatient gesture. "Take me to a *boite*. Let's drink champagne and dance. Afterwards, you can have your fun in

words. We shall be too tired to argue—or I will, and you can have your own way with your doubts and your hair-splitting.”

Repentantly I slipped off my dressing-gown and made myself ready. We went to *La Petite Chaise*. It was probably the smallest night-club in the world—certainly it was the smallest in Paris, as well as the most intimate and amusing. The floor space was as small as a toasted sandwich at a dowager duchess’s tea-party, and the music came from a tinkling piano and an entertainer who fancied he was Maurice Chevalier.

Malna and I sat in a corner, ignoring the surroundings as lovers do. We had forgotten the previous quarter of an hour. We were served silently and without any questions with champagne and chicken à la casserole. I remember that chicken, because we did not eat it. It lay there in front of us, crisp and brown, a sacrifice to Venus. I expect they ate it in the kitchen and perhaps the waiter kissed his fingers to our memory.

Of course everything we said was nonsense. Anyone listening to us—but who listens to lovers?—might have thought we were drunk or mad, but we were neither. My very doubts seemed to make Malna all the more dear to me, and I hated Grenant and Gougaloff. They were dark conspirators against my happiness, against hers; men who could not keep their eyes shut or their tongues still.

“I daren’t look too much into your eyes,” I said, “or I shall scream like a parrot. I shall repeat everything I have said to you, and you will find me dull.”

“Try,” she answered dreamily. “Each time you say it, it sounds newer and fresher than before. First you play it on violins, then on flutes, and then you are brazen like trumpets and then deeply sentimental like a cello.”

Yes; it was all nonsense. But what philosopher can prove to me that nonsense is not reality and that what we call rational behaviour is not an illusion?

Each time the piano tinkled we danced. We gave away a bottle of champagne to this one-man band, and then we retired to our corner and resumed our whispers.

A waiter, looking at us with mournful eyes, told us that once Louis Quatorze came to this very house. We thanked him for

the information and drank a silent toast to the king who had drunk red wine after the chase as he sat on the little chair (quite obviously nineteenth century) that the waiter pointed out to us. And then we drank mysteriously, on Malna's toast, to Nothing.

"Our love needs oblivion," she whispered. "It needs the silence of Nothing, and the purity of Nothing. To Nothing!"

For a while I could forget those doubts and the odd creatures who nurtured them. But once or twice I began a question. I did not ask it outright, of course, but I sought what I needed by indirect means.

"Are you French?" I asked.

"Not really. Half French. My mother was French—my father is Egyptian."

"An Egyptian!" I exclaimed. "Not one of those ancient Egyptians who made startling discoveries in science?" The question was stupid. My mind had switched suddenly over to Grenant, and I wanted to tell her all about his absurdities. And it very nearly gave me away. If I had started on Grenouille, inevitably I should have blurred out what he had told me. "Did he study medicine in Egypt, then?" I asked quickly.

"No, in France. Then he went to Algiers."

"And that's where he discovered the cure?"

"Yes. He worked at it for many years. Ever since I was a tiny child I can remember him at work in the laboratory. We were very poor—how I remember that, and then he found success—he and another doctor. The other doctor died and my father came to Paris to put the results of the research into action. Now you know everything." She smiled faintly with a trace of the mockery. "Any more doubts?"

I was ashamed of myself. Obviously she knew nothing. I kissed her hand so fiercely that she withdrew it.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Because I am so happy. I shan't pester you with another question. Let's go somewhere else. This is too quiet to get tired in, and unless we are tired we shall argue. . . ."

Chapter 14

THE "RIEN A FAIRE"

FEW PEOPLE know of a *boite* named the *Rien a Faire*—the Nothing To Do. It was situated off the Pigalle, and it had an exclusive clientele of thieves, prostitutes, pimps, and sundry others whose occupations caused the police many headaches. Here one could come and spend a few francs while speaking to men who had escaped from Devil's Island or who had a murder on their conscience which the police could not pin on them. There were also sensation-hunters who, having come to know of this poky little hole, went to see life in the raw. They could usually be recognized by their lack of that air of respectability which distinguished the regular patrons.

I don't know what induced me to take Malna there. She wanted to get tired. Perhaps it was that. There was so much to see, so much to laugh about, in the *Rien a Faire*, besides so many acrobatic feats to perform on the minute dance floor, that you not only grew tired, but even acquired the delightful sensation of wanting to be taken home on a stretcher.

Malna laughed softly to herself when I revealed the *Rien a Faire* to her.

"What's this?" she gasped.

"The lowest hole in the Paris sewer," I replied with the air of a guide-courier. "There are more criminals here at any one time than in Sing-Sing. Your neighbour may have killed his mother or his sweetheart. The waiter who served us is probably a forger who keeps his hand in by writing fake champagne labels for the cheaper *boites* in Montmartre. That dear old lady over there with the innocent blue eyes is almost certainly a procuress. The proprietor, my very good friend, is Jacques Rouge—Red Jack—who has a vocabulary that makes policeman release him immediately. He swears in every language in the world, they say; and his wife, Madame Popo, will probably come in and dance the can-can for us shortly, though she isn't a day under sixty. In fact, Malna, here are all the talents. It's the very place to get tired in."

It was right what I had said about Jacques Rouge. I had done him a favour after a very serious accident. I think he had tried to blow up a safe and failed, blowing off his right hand instead. He was scared stiff at the prospect of going to a doctor or a hospital. I had been at the Rien a Faire at the time, and my friend, an Alsatian named Mukeberg, happened to mention that I was a medical student. That was enough for the old rogue. Before I knew what was happening, I had been whisked into a private room and was undoing a very badly bandaged hand and listening to his anxious inquiries whether I could do anything for it. He muttered something about having cut it open on a tin-opener; and I laughed to myself, thinking that it must have been a very lethal tin-opener. But I agreed to stitch it up for him. I had to go home and fetch some instruments, and Jacques never forgot this favour. He always insisted on treating me royally whenever I paid him a visit.

As a matter of fact, it was some time since I had been in the Rien a Faire. There were new faces about and some old ones had disappeared. But that was not unusual; patrons disappeared for longer or shorter periods, and if one was aware of the ropes one did not make any inquiries; one took these comings and goings as a matter of course. Anyway, my visits were never very frequent. I did not want Jacques, that crafty old fox, to think I would make a habit of patching up criminals and was on the look-out for practice. I just liked Jacques' bluff, hearty manner and his large leonine head, and what I had done for him was in response to a whim of the moment. There was nothing illegal in stitching up a man's hand, but there were plenty of other things that might lead to contact with the police if I ever became a semi-regular thieves' doctor. I've known not a few promising students go that way. The crooks have plenty of money to offer, and they were not fussy about a completed degree, so long as one could do a few elementary and necessary things, like abortion, stitching up wounds, and applying dyes. A man with a little knowledge of plastic surgery could make a fortune.

In a roundabout way, Jacques had made a proposition to me, but I had turned it down. Consequently, he thought me rather

a fool—I might never have attained the salary he hinted at by honest means—but he liked me none the less—or perhaps because of my independence.

And now he was bearing down on me, his sharp eyes having discerned me from afar. He scampered through a crowd of dancers, scattering them right and left without ceremony.

"*Ab, voila, le petit docteur!*" he cried, drawing far more attention to me than I desired. "So you've dropped in for a bit of fun, eh? Listen, *mon vieux*. I have exactly the right girl for you. She is fat but—*ma foi*—as sweet as a daisy."

I screwed up one eye at him and coughed significantly. Malna was a little behind me, and Jacques Rouge had not realized she was with me. I took her by the arm and drew her beside me.

"Mademoiselle Vardarma," I said pointedly to him.

He clapped his hands in exuberant delight. "A lady! A beautiful lady! What joy!" Then cupping his hand he said to me in what was meant to be a whisper, though audible over the whole room: "Where did you pick her up? You have superb taste and great luck. You wish to have the room upstairs?"

I pushed him away. "M'mselle is a doctor's daughter." I turned to Malna with an air of abject apology. "Jacques has a heart as good as he himself is bad—which is saying a great deal. I've never been in here with anyone. I let others sample the chickens he fattens. You must forgive him. But I warned you: here are all the talents. The *Rien a Faire* does not mince its words. There's little sentimentality."

Malna smiled; she was obviously hugely delighted. "It reminds me of the Kasha in Algiers," she replied, taking my hand. "I used to wander in alone, dressed as an Arab girl. There's no need to be afraid for me. I'm enjoying it. Thanks for your brain-wave in coming here."

Meanwhile Jacques had whirled away. He returned in a few minutes hugging two bottles affectionately in his arms. His face was one animated grin.

"Champagne," he said. "This is real champagne—not the stuff I give the tourists, though the label"—he shrugged. "A man is a fool who thinks a label never lies."

He installed us at his best and most secluded table (from

which he cleared a couple of obvious sightseers). All the time he studied Malna closely, but she pretended not to notice it, and from time to time he glanced at me meaningly. It was as though a constant stream of looks was passing from his eyes and Malna's and mine.

Whatever his other labels did, the ones on these bottles did not lie. The pop of the cork had the genuine ring, and the first sip proved that Jacques was true to his word. But that did not explain the curious stares he gave Malna; nor could they be accounted for as the triumph of his masculinity over his manners.

"Shall we dance, Malna?" I asked, hoping that he would accept the hint and that by the time we had finished contorting ourselves to the odd rhythm that was neither rumba nor tango he would have gone away. We danced in silence, our bodies close together, so that her heart seemed to beat under mine; and hers was a very frightened heart, like a bird's held in the hand. I tried to reassure her by my bodily pressure, but she was afraid. What of, I did not know. She clutched my hand nervously, as if she were suffering some acute pain, so that when the dance finished I decided we had better sit down, though the band was continuing and Red Jack was still at our table.

Jacques had something to say. He could barely wait till we had sat down.

"You know, the name's familiar. You said Algiers, M'mselle?"

"What name?" I asked sharply. I was annoyed with him that he would not leave us alone. And fear was at the back of my mind.

"Vardarma. That was what you said, was it not?" He seemed struggling with his memory, and I saw no reason to help him.

"Yes," he went on. "I knew a Vardarma once. I met him in Algiers, too. A big fellow with a black beard, who drank heavily. I believe he said he was a doctor . . ."

"M'mselle's father is a doctor," I broke in, "and she has been in Algiers. You have been led away by the similarities and got the name wrong."

"I never forget a name," replied Jacques proudly. "But I suggest nothing. Why should I?" He spread his hands to make it quite clear that insinuations of any kind were very far from his mind. "The name brought back a recollection, that was all. This man was a giant and everyone was afraid of him—everyone but me, of course. Who has ever seen Red Jack afraid?" He puffed out his chest. "He was employed by a doctor, this man, and something happened up there—the doctor died, and the police looked into it, and one of the servants was arrested. So much I heard. And this fellow was in a great hurry to be away. He asked me to find him a passage on a boat. I was a fireman on one of the boats that ran between Marseilles and Algiers at that time."

"Interesting," I commented, "but I can't see what it has to do with us. Go and get us some more champagne, and we'll make ourselves happy."

He trotted off, and I looked at Malna. She was perfectly still, staring at the dancers.

"He's crazy," I said. "I'm sorry if he embarrassed you. He probably tells the same story to everyone he meets here. You know how some people behave. They get hold of an adventure and tie it on to everyone they meet."

"There's nothing to forgive, George. It's very amusing, for I've heard it before."

"You've heard it before?"

She laughed, but a little uneasily.

"I am used to hearing things about my father. He has many, many enemies. Some are merely stupid, like Gougloff; others"—she shrugged—"are dangerous. You can't be a great man without enemies. Someone is bound to get hurt when you rise to greatness. If you'd let Jacques run on he would probably have told you that this Vardarma killed the doctor to steal his money or his practice or"—she paused significantly—"his invention. My father has had all this said about him. But you know, as I know, that they are black lies."

"If you believe them to be lies, then I'm certain they are."

"That doesn't sound very certain, does it?"

"It's very certain. If you lied once to me—just once—then I'd know everything between us had been a lie."

She eyed me fondly. "You're little more than a child," she said, with the air of a child herself. "Let's dance."

I took her into my arms again, but she was no longer the frightened, trembling bird. She clung close to me, so that I could feel the warmth of her supple body through her clothes and mine—a subtle, suggestive warmth that spoke of sympathy as well as proximity.

"George," she whispered, "you do love me?"

I bent my head and kissed her hair; I stifled a sigh near her ear.

"I have answered that question often enough," I replied. "You must guess from now on." I twirled her round exuberantly, so that we became bosom to bosom.

"Let's go home," she said, with sudden weariness. "I'm tired at last."

Chapter 15

THE RED JACK

WE DROVE home in a taxi, huddled together, trying to kiss despite the bumps, as we slid over the city street. Malna lay in my arms, unusually timid, her large grey eyes wide open, as though she were thinking a dream.

I was surprised to find the concierge up when we arrived back at my rooms.

"There's a gentleman upstairs to see you, sir," she said. "I thought I'd better wait up and tell you." She had seen Malna, but was tactful enough to ignore her.

"Malna," I said, "I haven't the faintest idea who this is. It's a man, anyway." I smiled wryly. "You'd better go home, don't you think?"

"All right." She squeezed my hand and let me open the door for her. I waited till she had found a taxi, and then I ran upstairs. I had said that I had not the faintest idea who my visitor was, but as I made for my door I was certain about his identity. My foreboding was right. It was Gougloff.

"Why have you called so late?" I demanded. Then, seeing him cringe, as he always did when spoken to roughly, I softened. "That doesn't mean I'm not glad to see you," I added.

He seemed surprised at this welcome.

"So," he remarked, giving a little whistle. "You've found out for yourself."

"What?" I asked stupidly. I thought he was referring to Malna, yet I might have known that there was only one thing that interested him at all deeply.

"About Vardarma. Grenouille told you."

I noticed the use of Grenant's nickname, which Gougloff had never used before. They had been getting thick, then; and what addled plot had they tried to hatch between them?

"Yes; I've talked to Grenouille. How did you know?"

"I tracked him down. He told me you'd agreed to black-mail Vardarma. Is that true?" He stared at me, goggle-eyed.

I did not like to hear it put so brutally. After all, I had only led Grenant on.

"That's what I *said*," I temporized; "but . . ."

"Exactly." He cut me short, with a greater show of decision than I imagined him to be capable of. "You'd be a fool to do it. Grenant has come to me once or twice with the same wildcat notion. To-night he asked me again. He thought I was indispensable to anything he and you might do, even if it was only ensuring my silence."

"I see. I only agreed to his suggestion to keep him quiet."

"Well, what do you intend doing now?"

"Surely it's a matter for the police?"

"A fat lot of good that would be!"

"What else? The man's a crook, and he ought to be made to suffer for it. We can't let him go on practising fraud."

Gougloff gave me a very puzzling smile. "And Malna? What is her sentence to be—at your hands?"

"Malna? She's innocent. I am certain of that."

"I'm not so sure. She has the same devil in her as her father." It was the first time I had heard him mention her name without a show of exaggerated emotion. Something was happening, had happened, to Gougloff. "Suppose she wasn't

innocent, as you think? Borodin, for our own personal reasons we don't want anything to happen to her, do we? I love her too, remember. So far as the police are concerned, we must keep silent."

"But how else can we stop him?" The fragments of Red Jack's story floated into my mind. It might be true—or some of it; and if so . . . No, I must think that over some other time. Here was Gougaloff, sane and reasonable for a change; I had to attend to him. "There's no doubt he's a rogue, just as I originally suspected. And there's something else. It happened to-night, and it looks damned fishy."

"Grenouille, you mean?"

I shook my head. "No." I told him Red Jack's story. I don't know why, for it did not seem very relevant just then. After all, I knew Vardarma had been in Algiers; Malna had told me how poor they were; and if his associate was killed, he might easily have looked for a cheap way out of the country.

"That needs looking into," commented Gougaloff, turning it over in his mind. "I should say he pinched the formula from that doctor. Have you found him out yet?"

I was puzzled at the question; surely it was what we were talking about.

"I mean generally," Gougaloff explained. "He knows very little about medicine—about as much as I do; and he's certainly no chemist. Else why should he employ me?"

"I see. I thought he'd bought you over, and you were rebelling through jealousy."

"Call it what you like," he replied bitterly, "but I'll tell you the truth about why I've stuck to him so long. I made him think he could buy my silence—and all the time I've been waiting. Patiently I've waited, and now, at last, I think I'm to be rewarded."

"What for and what with?"

"Rewarded for enduring that living hell. I've found the formula, or rather I know where he keeps it. It's in a little black notebook he carries about with him or locks in his desk. He gives me the ingredients for the anti-toxins already half prepared, and I've been unable to analyse them. I've just

completed what he started without knowing what I was doing. But now I shall know. I mean to get that notebook. I want your help."

"Why not tell the police?" I insisted. This was too much. I had hoped for a night of pleasure, and I had started off with a conspiracy for blackmail; now, at an early hour of the morning, I was being inveigled into some kind of theft.

"The police are no good, I say. The formula's far more important than a petty personal revenge. We know that Vardarma's got something but it's only half a cure. Now that's the tragedy. I'm a scientist, Borodin, say what you like, and I'm more interested in finding that formula and working on it myself than in seeing Vardarma sent to jail, for all he's done to me. He only knows what he's learnt off parrot-fashion about the cure. He daren't face a medical audience to discuss it, and he daren't publish it. If he did, he'd make a fool of himself, or else he'd have to get your help and mine and that would let the cat out of the bag. It's a crime to let a man like that hold on to something with such potentialities. It's a far greater crime than anything Vardarma's done. Now, will you help me to get that formula?"

"I'll do anything you like, Gougaloff, anything." His case seemed unanswerable. "But we've got to work carefully. He mustn't suspect a thing. We'll go on as if nothing had happened, and we'll take the chance when it offers. It's sure to if we keep our eyes open."

My head was buzzing with schemes, but few were practical. They rose in my brain like champagne bubbles; and perhaps that was what they were.

"Grenant?" asked Gougaloff, shrugging.

"He'll have to be kept at bay for a while. When we've got the formula, he can do what he likes. He can blackmail Vardarma to his heart's content, for all I care."

"Good." Gougaloff was like a good general conferring with a staff officer. "One thing more: don't trust Malna."

"She knows nothing," I said fervently. "And if anything happens she must be spared."

The old look flashed for a moment in his eyes. "You've

been with her this evening," he said accusingly. "I know. I feel it. As soon as I came into this room, I could smell her scent—something like mimosa, yet not mimosa. No, don't be afraid. But you're a fool, Borodin, a damned fool. Don't you see what her game is?"

"She has no 'game,' as you call it."

I resented the way he was speaking of Malna—slightly contemptuous, taking it for granted she was an accomplice, and trying to pay me back for her aloofness towards him.

"She's deep," he said musingly. "She wants to divide us—you and me; keep us apart. She wants to win you to their side and keep you there. Oh, not for good; just for as long as you are useful to her and her father. You wait and see what happens. She'll tire of you as she tired of me."

I was not wholly convinced. I did not know how far his affair with Malna had gone.

"Listen, Gougaloff," I said on the spur of the moment; "may I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes. I don't care."

"Did she ever love you?" I grew suddenly confused. "I mean, did she come to your room . . . ?"

His eyes narrowed. "I should like to tell you a lie," he said in a strangled tone. "My vanity tempts me to say that she did—but the plain fact is that she didn't. Believe me, it was only a matter of price, though. She knew she could buy my silence for a time with a dinner or two and perhaps a kiss—so why should she give more? With you, perhaps, it's different . . ."

"That's not your business," I said quickly, seeking to escape from the intolerable position into which I had betrayed myself.

To my surprise he did not flare up. "Look here, Borodin," he said apologetically, "nothing's my business except that formula. That's all I care about. If we get it, we might work on it together and make it really successful. That would matter, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. I'll talk to you to-morrow and discuss the plan of campaign. I'm tired now."

He looked round the room and sniffed.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you," he said stiffly and turned to

the door, leaving me with no clear idea of my own feelings. Was this nocturnal visit merely a demonstration of jealousy, of spying, or did he really come to confide in me? I could not tackle that question then, however. My lids were heavy with sleep, and I began to undress slowly. But my thoughts would not be still, and slipping on a dressing-gown I flung myself on the bed, prepared to wrestle with all these contradictions. Thus it was, for the second time, that Malva found me.

Chapter 16

A RECOGNITION

SHE CAME into my room silently, like a wraith. She was in stockinged feet, and she moved so stealthily that I hardly knew whether she was there or not. I switched on the bedside lamp, and for a full minute we stared at each other without speaking, almost as though we were strangers.

"Don't be angry, George," she said, in a voice that held so much humility that I was surprised. "I sat in the taxi down the road until I saw your guest come out and go round the corner."

"Why did you do that?" Oh, these everlasting doubts, I thought. Must she always be spying, must I always think of her half as lover, half as enemy? It was cruel, cruel. I was angry and she saw it; she cowered slightly.

"I had to see whether the concierge was lying or not. She said a gentleman—yes. But gentlemen do not call on others at this time of night unless there is some very special reason. I had to see for myself. I might have guessed who it would be, if it really was a man. I suppose Gougloff came to warn you?"

I nodded. "Yes," I replied colourlessly. "I am sorry for him. He is really very much in love with you."

"Love. Love," she repeated. "Oh, I am tired of that word already. What has it to do with me? I am bored with Gougloff and his love."

"And with ours, too?" I asked quickly. She was strange, in one of her unaccountable moods.

"Don't ask me, George. I don't know."

"But you must have encouraged him." I wanted time to think, to try to discover whether there was any deep-lying motive behind all this.

"Really!" she exclaimed, with a sudden touch of anger. "You and he are impossible. I'm beginning to wonder whether there's any real difference between you. You're like a couple of schoolboys trying to win a neighbour's daughter with your tricks. I resent being talked about by the two of you. I suppose he asked you whether I had been with you to-night?"

"He knew. He recognized your perfume. That told me more than anything. I'm sorry, Malna."

"You're sorry! I wonder. What did he want?"

"Nothing unusual. He wanted to make a scene, to let his jealousy run riot, and to warn me that you will make as big a fool of me as you have made of him. But that doesn't worry me. I have learnt not to give more for less, so I am not afraid."

She curled her lip; and she looked then very much like her father. She sat down and began to put on her shoes, which she had been carrying in her hand.

"You believe him, then. That's an admission. You don't love me."

"I love you as much as you love me."

"Pah! How can you measure love like that? Isn't it possible that you should love me a little more? One loves, or one does not love. One doesn't measure it out in a graduated glass. Either one loves with one's whole being, or one does not love. Not real love, that is."

For the first time I noticed a hint of laughter in her voice. Despite the bitter words, her tone had suddenly softened and she had grown challenging, not with vulgar provocation, but with a certain dignified earnestness.

"I don't know what to think, Malna," I replied. My thoughts were filled with her father and his crimes—if crimes they were. Unconsciously I hinted at it, commenting on my own thoughts rather than on her own remarks. "I believe you are innocent."

"Of what? What do you mean? Innocent of upsetting Gougloff, or what?"

"I mean, you are pure. You would never descend to anything mean. You would not play with me, for instance. It is because you must always be honest with yourself."

"Perhaps you are right, George, though your reasons may be wrong." She rose and took a step towards me. "One day, you will believe—you will know that I love you."

There was a sudden wave of sympathy between us, as though we both realized that we had tied ourselves in a tangled skein of words; all our thoughts and moods seemed to have collided, and we had become suspicious of each other, fearing to advance too far and fearing to retreat. On either side of us a deep abyss of doubt stretched downwards to infinity; and we balanced on a narrow ledge that was already crumbling. I looked into her eyes for guidance. They were serene, but for a slight hint of mockery, as though at my unbelief.

"'One day' is so indefinite," I said, trying to be light. "Why must I wait so long?"

"You need not—that lies with you. But you would have to take me on trust. Can you take anything on trust, George—even your own thoughts?"

I did not know how to reply. She had so deep a penetration, so uncanny an insight into me, that I was nonplussed. "Does your father know where you are?" I asked suddenly.

"No." She shook her head. "I told him I was staying the night with friends. Do you believe me?"

"If you say so, I do. Only I don't understand you. Why should I, all in a single day, be attracted and repelled by you? Why should you hate me and love me and hate me again and then come here?"

"I don't know. I'm not a scientist. I don't stop to probe and analyse. I am a woman. I go on impulse, if you like, wherever it takes me. It is something stronger than reason. Perhaps, for all your laboratories, it is something bigger than reason. Don't try to cut too deeply into me, George. I am afraid."

"Afraid of what you might say to yourself in the morning when the daylight brings common sense back again? Afraid to face up to falseness? Is that where your fear lies?" I was bitter in spite of myself.

"No," she returned calmly. "I never torture myself with vain regrets. I am never false to myself—you said so just now yourself. This afternoon I was, when I was playing with you. But you were playing with me. Perhaps I meet falseness with falseness, sincerity with sincerity. Perhaps after all I am only a mirror of what is put in front of me. But to-night it is different. We have merged together for no reason. I want you to love me for no reason. I have come here for no reason. Let us do everything for no reason. Let us be free of all reason to-night, not for ever seeking into every dark corner of ourselves in endeavours to find something false. There must be a lot of falseness in both of us, for we are sensitive people; and sensitive people carry on a masquerade to create beautiful lies. Let to-night be a beautiful lie, if you like—but take me in your arms and say you love me."

I did not say anything as I drew her to me. Intently I gazed into her eyes before I kissed their lids.

"You are clever, so clever," I murmured at last. "You know so well that a beautiful lie may often turn to a truth. Isn't it, indeed, a part of truth in its own self by its very beauty? Is that why you want me to lie?"

"Perhaps." She snuggled closer to me. "Turn that light out—then you may be able to believe that my face is full of love for you."

Once again there was a trace of bitterness in her voice as if she were hurt. It was the bitterness before which I felt helpless. I looked at her penetratingly, conscious not so much of the communion between us as of the barriers that seemed magically to grow up to keep us apart whenever we were closest. Her eyes filled with tears and she made a little shrinking movement, as though she was afraid to face my scrutiny.

I turned out the light.

"Here in the darkness," I said, "I will pretend that you are smiling and happy." And when I pressed my cheek to hers I could feel that it was creased in a smile. And then we embraced with unbounded tenderness, so that the barriers between us were forgotten and dissolved away, and our young bodies grew warm and eager. . . .

Chapter 17

DR. GOUGALOFF'S ANGER

A CLOCK in the distance chimed nine. It was a late hour for me still to be in bed, and I slipped out and dressed quietly. Malna was still sleeping peacefully. To me, too, had come a curious unnatural calm, in which my thoughts seemed to have left me, and reality had no place.

Then, with the sudden eruptiveness of an undammed flood, all that had happened came back to memory. It was not built up piecemeal; I saw it all at once in one comprehensive picture. Malna—Gougaloff—Malna again; Jacques Rouge—the *Rien a Faire*—Grenouille. No, I told myself, it was the night that had the quality of sanity; my waking life and its people made the nightmare. Above all this was the remembrance that I had agreed to see Gougaloff before I presented myself at Vardarma's house. It was not an interview to which I could look forward.

I left a hurriedly scribbled note for Malna on top of her clothes at the foot of the bed. It said nothing in particular, yet it seemed vitally important to me: I loved her, I had gone to work, and that if she could hold her dreams till the evening I would have supper with her. . . . Silly things, perhaps, not worth recording; yet it is those which make life human, which raise our complicated existence above the level of the ants. I stood for a moment or two looking down on her, wanting to kiss her yet afraid to wake her up, so I kissed her clothes as though they held her proxy and ran out before my inclinations mastered my sense of duty.

Gougaloff was waiting for me in the street, looking pale and worn, with that curious empty expression in the eyes one sees in people who have had no sleep. His clothes looked as though they had not been off his back for days. His fingers played nervously with a yellow-papered Russian cigarette.

"Had a good night's rest?" he asked ironically. I did not reply: it was not a particularly happy omen for the day. Gougaloff's moods were unpredictable, except in the sense that they had a common quality of unpleasantness. "Well, it doesn't

matter," he continued after a pause, setting off with surprising briskness. "What is important is that we get that formula as soon as possible. Then you can inform the police if you like—or I will. He'll get penal servitude for this, without a doubt and serve him right. I've altered my mind—I want to see him suffer."

"And I've altered my mind, too," I retorted. "I refuse to have anything to do with your dirty business."

"Ah!" He smiled triumphantly. "Then you *have* been with her all night. I thought so. They couldn't buy you with money—that's to your credit anyway—so she came along to you and said: 'Here I am. Take me—and stay mum.' Very pretty, but not unexpected."

If he hoped to annoy me, I must have disappointed him terribly. I remained calm.

"Gougaloff," I said very quietly. "You can think what you like. I dislike Vardarma quite as much as you do, but for different reasons perhaps, though I realize how important it is to get the formula. I will help you in that, at any rate, and honour my promise. But I will not be responsible for any police action—you and Grenant can fight that out between you. Once you have the formula you can work on it, but you'll have to be quick. He's bound to be caught out soon—almost any day. He's paying the penalty of success, you know; the doctors are clamouring to know what it's all about, because they mustn't use 'secret' cures."

"But haven't you any social conscience?" he demanded. "The man's a murderer, and you know it."

"I don't see it quite so strongly as you do. You yourself say he only takes patients who are incurable and more than half-way to the grave. What does he give them? Three weeks of relief from suffering—three weeks of renewed hope so that they can make their peace with the world. That's something, isn't it? All right, I know what you're going to say: they die for sure at the end of the three weeks. What about it? They'd die in any event, so what does it matter? It's no different from relieving the pain of a man who's fatally injured in an accident."

"You're saying all this because you love Malna," commented

Gougoloff calmly. "Those might be her very own sophistries. Well, it's your business, not mine. Once I have the formula he can go to hell in any way he likes. I'd even let Grenouille blackmail him—by the way, that man's more of a toad than a frog." Suddenly he chuckled savagely. "I'd like to see your Malna trying to live on the sort of salary you're likely to earn for the next few years. Two can starve as cheaply as one, I suppose."

I admitted Gougoloff's right to be bitter at my expense, but not at Malna's.

"Think what you like, Gougoloff. The formula's your business and Malna is mine; that's what you said yourself. As for Grenant, he can do as he likes. But I warn you: when I've helped you to get the formula, I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"I don't know that I want your help. I can do it myself."

"Just as you please."

"But you'd better not go to dear Papa Vardarma and tell him about me," he said seriously. "It'd make him very suspicious of you, to say the least; and he's not a nice man to have as an enemy—especially if you want his daughter."

He shrugged his shoulders and made off to some unknown destination. He did not wait to hear my promise that I would hold my tongue. I might flatter myself that he trusted to my honour, but the real truth was probably that he relied on my fear of Vardarma. Perhaps he was right.

I looked at my watch; it had turned half past nine, and I would be late at Vardarma's, so I called a taxi. Gougoloff must have been hurrying on foot, for he arrived a few minutes later and greeted me morosely, just as if he had not seen me before that morning. Vardarma called me into his study almost at once.

"Borodin," he said, with the directness that was so typical of him, "I want you to take over the manufacture of the anti-toxin from Gougoloff. I'm tired of his moods, and I think they're affecting his work. I can't run the risk of any mistakes. He can do something else in the clinic as I'm having more beds. You know what to do."

I did not. Gougaloff would never breathe a word and always cleared me out of the laboratory before he set to work.

"It's not difficult," continued Vardarma, when I had explained the position to him. "Gougaloff was quite right for once; I told him no one was to know exactly what he did, though, of course, that was before you joined us. I prepare the basic ingredients myself and then you mix them according to a formula I shall give you. It's really very simple. Any pharmacist could do it, and you're supposed to be a doctor, my boy."

"What about the demonstrations?" I asked. "Will Gougaloff . . . ?"

"He can give injections to the patients. As for the demonstrations, they can wait for a little while. There are none on the list at the moment, and I'm refusing invitations. The good work has already been largely done. We've got to prepare the reports to the various scientific bodies, and we shall have our hands full. From now on, I must be left free to collate my notes. And that reminds me," he went on, as though a thought had just struck him; "we may be moving soon. This place is getting a bit cramped. So don't be surprised if you come in and find me packing one fine day."

As he said this his eyes travelled unconsciously over his desk. I had not noticed it before; it was tidier than I had ever seen it. Normally it was a stormy sea of papers, with here and there an island of handsomely grained mahogany showing itself amid the turbulent, high-tossed waves. Now it was practically all dry land. Even the correspondence basket, usually full to overflowing, was perfectly empty. It was unnatural; for Vardarma, in his study at least, was not a tidy man; the hat tossed on one chair, the gloves on a second, the gold-banded walking-cane lying on the floor, all bore testimony to that. But I said nothing. I think Vardarma, himself a keen observer, expected one to notice everything, but one had not to show it; to be too discerning was to arouse his mighty wrath; and—yes, Gougaloff was probably right—I was afraid of Vardarma.

"Will Gougaloff show me what to do?" I asked.

He nodded. "Tell him to show you—and say I told you to. At once. Then send him to me."

I entered the laboratory and was greeted with an ironical smile from Gougaloff.

"Well, what orders?" he asked.

I told him. "You're to hand over the anti-toxins to me," I said. "From now on, you're out, and I do it all. You're going into the clinic."

"I see. I'm appointed chief assistant executioner. Is that it?"

"I think you're to do injections. But you're keeping him waiting. I was to tell you about this and then tell you he wanted you."

He gave me a quick, suspicious glance. "Oh, I see! I suppose you've told him everything. I was a fool to trust you." He waved to his bench. "It's all there—everything. You ought to be able to do it without my showing you. Anyway, have a shot, and I'll see how you're getting on when I return."

I nodded and crossed to the bench, where, after a little while, I became absorbed in the work. It was simple enough, as Vardarma had said—so simple that it hardly seemed necessary to have a man of Gougaloff's talents doing it. With all his personal failings, Gougaloff was undoubtedly quite a clever chemist. This was work which, as Vardarma had said also, any pharmacist could do. It puzzled me—not the process, but the whole position; my original sense of incongruity returned.

But I was not left long to enjoy my thoughts. The study was a little way from the laboratory, the two being separated by the length of a corridor. Yet now I could hear raised angry voices. I could hear oaths and then a babel of sound that seemed like a bull roaring. True, Gougaloff had left the laboratory door open, but even so it was astonishing to hear so plainly. Something was going on in there; and I judged that Gougaloff had released all Vardarma's worst rage.

Chapter 18

A QUARREL

THE NOISE continued for at least five minutes. Now and again I heard Gougloff's voice, very weak and protesting. And then the door opened and he slunk out like a whipped cur, his face pale, his eyes frightened. Very softly he shut the door behind him and for a moment he stood actually trembling.

Once before—on our very first meeting—I had seen him change from servile dread to overmastering anger; and now he made the same metamorphosis over again. His pale face reddened; the trembling hands doubled into fists; the eyes blazed. He growled in his throat, like a bear, and suddenly, without warning, picked up a glass beaker and crushed it in his hand. He did this so easily that, for the first time, I realized he must have enormous muscular strength hidden in his curiously unlovely body. As abruptly as he had given way to rage, he changed again, this time to a sort of numbed indifference. Now was the time to speak.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Everything," he replied in a weak voice. "It's that fool Grenant. He went to Vardarma yesterday and tried to work blackmail on his own. Of course, Vardarma laughed at him—he could kill Grenouille with one hand—and demanded who had put him up to that. Who do you think he said?"

"Who?" I was filled with an unpleasantly vivid recollection of our conversation at Chez Georges. In a way, I had made the suggestion. I must have betrayed anxiety in my voice, for Gougloff smiled nastily.

"Oh, don't get alarmed. No, it wasn't you. He said I'd put him up to it."

"You? But why in heaven's name . . . ?" Truly, Grenant was the father of all blundering fools.

"How should I know?—except that everyone picks on me for a scapegoat. You see, he didn't threaten Vardarma with exposure of his own case—oh, dear me, no! He threatened Vardarma with my knowledge, as he put it, of the whole fraud.

He swore I'd stand by him and give damning evidence unless Vardarma disgorged half a million francs. The bloody fool! I don't mind his playing what monkey-tricks he likes on his own, but now he's practically ruined everything. He's made Vardarma suspicious. He asked me if you were a partner in all this." Gougloff smiled again; it was a sight even more unpleasant than his earlier expression.

"Well, what did you say?" I did my best to be calm, to sound perfectly under control, but I believe my voice shook a little.

"I said 'No.' I said you had known about it, but you refused point-blank to have anything to do with Grenant's dirty tricks."

I was as astonished as a mouse might be if a cat stood aside politely to let it enter its hole.

"But why did you say that?" I gasped. "Wasn't it a glorious opportunity to get some of your own back?"

"Perhaps. But I have other fish to fry. While he was carrying on, I had been thinking. Yes; he thought I was brow-beaten to the verge of helplessness, but I was planning. I knew that if he kept me on, I would certainly be watched all the time, so the only person who had a chance of doing what we want to do would be you." He licked his lips. "That's why. Understand?"

I did, only too well. Gougloff was forcing my hand with a vengeance and I was getting into a very unhappy position. None the less, I was grateful to him, I must confess, for not having betrayed me.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll do my best to get the formula so long as you keep me out of all this."

"I promise—only you've got to get that formula."

It was a threat, and I knew it. He could go to Vardarma and tell him what was, after all, the truth; and Grenant would support him, especially if a little persuasion were applied; and I knew that I would be kept to the letter of my bargain, whatever my inclinations might be. In dealing with this matter, Gougloff was a different man—a man of determination and resource, ready to turn even his disappointments to his advantage. He gave me a quick, searching look, and then turned to the bench.

"So you've been getting on with the anti-toxin," he remarked in a casual voice. "Quite simple. Anything you want to know?"

"Yes. But it's nothing to do with the anti-toxin." I was annoyed at his sangfroid, not least because it was unexpected. "How is it Grenant didn't drag me into it, too?"

"Still scared?" He laughed unpleasantly. "You ought to guess that easily enough—you know Grenouille better than I do. But if you do want to know—well, Grenant wasn't bringing anyone into it unless he had to, and then it had to be the more valuable one. My knowledge was more likely to frighten Vardarma than yours. After all, you are little more than his 'yes-man,' so far. You see, Grenouille wanted every sou for himself, if he could get it. Now let's stop all this. He might come in at any moment."

He began checking over the materials on the bench.

Chapter 19

A POTENTIAL DANGER

I DID not see Gougloff again for some time, though I knew that he had not been dismissed. Vardarma himself told me so when he had called me in to question me about the Grenant affair. I told him the truth up to a point. I agreed that I had known about Grenouille's scheme, but I put it that I thought I had scared him out of it. I tried to give the impression that I thought poor Grenouille so much of a coward that he would do nothing about it. Vardarma had nodded but said nothing. To this day I do not know whether he believed me or not. He sent me back to the laboratory to prepare some more anti-toxin.

The quantities I was processing made me wonder whether Vardarma was about to open a cancer hospital on a large scale or was contemplating putting the stuff on the market. But that did not trouble me so much as the question of why I was there at all. Of course, Gougloff was potentially a greater danger; he was a trained chemist and might one day stumble on or

discover the secret held in the little capsule that Vardarma issued, whereas my chemistry was no more than that which it was necessary for a medical student to know.

I paused as a sudden light dawned on me—and with it a suspicion. I had thought of the anomaly of it all—Gougloff, the chemist, was in the clinic; I, the nearly qualified doctor, was in the chemical laboratory. It was the exact opposite of what might have been expected. Yet wasn't it exactly the arrangement that might be chosen by a man who had something to conceal. Both of us knew enough—and no more—for the roles allotted to us; neither of us was likely to make, in Grenant's favourite phrase, any startling discovery, or to notice anything suspicious unless it happened to be glaring.

This was an entirely new angle on the affair, and I kicked myself for not having seen it at once. No doubt Vardarma was suspicious of both of us. He did not want Gougloff to get the key to the preparation; he did not want me to discover the true clinical history of his cases. Yet he could not discharge either of us without a grave risk of being talked about; to some extent, he was dependent on our good will.

I glanced at the clock and saw it was nearly time for me to go. I was glad. My work now was uninteresting, for I have never been interested in chemical matters except as a means to an end; and besides I had a lot to talk about. I was determined now to find out every word, every syllable, I could about Vardarma. He was playing some deep game. There was this threatened removal, for instance; did it portend flight? If it did, then Gougloff and I were going to be in a very awkward position, since we should be left with patients on our hands—patients that neither of us was qualified to treat. And, why flight now? I asked myself again and again as I washed, preparatory to departure. What was happening—threatening—in the background? The cessation of the demonstrations was suspicious in itself. No; it would not do. I must find out what was going on.

Absentmindedly I had walked into the *bistro* where I had not been since I had last met Grenant. And there he was again, a pile of books beside him and an aloof expression on his face.

At first, he tried not to see me, but when I walked right across his line of vision he nodded distantly. But I was not to be put off. I had certain things to say to Monsieur Grenant le Grenouille; and as it turned out he was once again to impart new momentum to the whole Vardarma business. He was like an evil spirit where Vardarma's relations with me were concerned. I called loudly to him and beckoned him to my side. Reluctantly, he came, and I bought him one of his favourite drinks.

For a while I let him sit beside me saying nothing and sitting hunched up in obvious mental and bodily discomfort. Then I turned on him.

"Well, you're a fine blackmailer, aren't you?" I asked disparagingly.

He nodded miserably.

"If you'd had any sense at all. . . . But no, I ought to know better than to suspect you of having sense." I was enjoying his discomfiture, though I knew that, in the end, I should forgive him. Poor Grenouille always looked so terribly pathetic that one forgave him in spite of oneself. But I had reason to berate him, as he had reason to be gloomy; he had committed the unpardonable blunder of rushing to the police and denouncing himself as a fake cure. As a result the police had laughed at him, told him they'd let him off this time, and called and apologized to Vardarma. The police were on Vardarma's side now, and it would be difficult to secure their help if it should be needed.

"What would I have done if I'd had sense?" he asked miserably.

"You certainly wouldn't have gone to the police. It's only harmed you and made them keep an eye on you. I suppose Vardarma warned you that it wouldn't do you any good."

"He said that the very first thing of all."

"And then you threatened him with Gougloff?"

"Yes. It flashed into my head. I told him Gougloff knew all about his tricks. I missed you out," he went on with obvious regret, "because I thought I should win. I knew you had tricked me. I was furious and decided you shouldn't have a sou."

"Thanks."

I watched him scratch his head in a puzzled way and then pick up his St. Raphael. He seemed to have lost all his buoyancy. Already I was feeling a little sorry for this blundering, very crushed frog.

"Did Vardarma say anything else of interest?" I asked, determined to make him suffer as long as possible. I could see that every mention of the affair caused him pain from the memory of his own inglorious ineptitude.

"No. He said something about moving to a larger place, but I don't believe him." Something of the old fire sparked in him. "If you ask me, he's getting ready to make a flit. I must have scared him. Don't be surprised if you turn up one morning and find him gone."

I had had the same thought myself, but I was not going to follow it up now. I did not want Grenant's half-baked opinions anyway. I looked at the books by his side.

"Let's forget it. Have another drink." I ordered one for him and one for myself. "What are you reading now—still Egyptology?"

He suddenly sparkled like a piece of glass on which a sun ray has fallen. Obviously his experience had not quenched his thirst for knowledge.

"Oh, no," he replied. "I found Egyptology was too dry. It's all museum stuff, you know. If you know the museum catalogues by heart, you can become a very learned expert, and that's all there is in it. No. I'm going back to medicine, but I'm specializing."

"Specializing?" I raised my eyebrows. Despite his years of study, Grenant was by no means within sight of the stage at which even mild specialization seemed possible. But Grenant was Grenant; and he did as he fancied.

"Yes. I'm taking forensic medicine—medical jurisprudence, you know. Very interesting subject. The things they do are marvellous. Do you know," he went on impressively, in quite the old way, "they can tell whether a hair comes from a head or an axilla—just a single hair—and the things they do with blood . . ."

"Yes, I do know. But what on earth put you on to forensic medicine?"

"I met a most interesting man—an Englishman as a matter of fact he is."

Now we were coming to it. In a moment I should be hearing about this unknown Englishman's startling discoveries. Perhaps he had discovered the elusive personal factor in blood. But I was doubly sceptical this time—sceptical because the introduction was by Grenant, and sceptical—yes, let me admit it—because the unknown was an Englishman. On the Continent it seems indecent to suspect the Englishmen one meets of making startling discoveries—or even minor ones. People like Newton and Faraday and Clerk Maxwell and Rutherford one thinks of as freaks in a race given above all to outstanding mediocrity. Yet even then I realized that I could have extended my list by a good many names without effort; there was Lister, for example, to whom my profession owed a great deal; Harvey had discovered the circulation of the blood; Dalton had made the atomic theory practical. No, perhaps they weren't so mediocre after all.

"Has he made any startling discoveries?" I asked.

Grenouille shook his head, so that I opened my eyes in blank surprise.

"No," he went on impressively. "But he will. He'll be a great expert some day, and I shall get the credit in his memoirs for first having recognized his genius." This was a new line for Grenant and a rather subtle variation of the old; the discoverer of discoverers was now the detector of embryonic genius. It would be easier going. Probably Grenant would be dead before his young protégés proved their brilliance or their crass stupidity; but no one could say him nay now. "He used to be at the Sorbonne. I remember him a few years back, and now he's returned for a short visit. He hopes to go on to Lyons to spend some time with Locard at the Technical Police Laboratory. He's studying medical jurisprudence, you know. He impressed me so much I thought I might as well follow it up. You see, Borodin," he continued, "it's a useful science. I mean, fighting crime . . ."

"Is it a good occupation for an unsuccessful blackmailer?" I put in quickly, unable to resist the impulse. He made a grimace and swallowed hard, but he did not protest. Instead he looked about him despondently, so that I regretted my words.

Grenouille's excursion into active crime had obviously crushed him, for he was unable to continue his discourse. I did not get the lecture on fingerprints or toxicology I expected. Instead, he gazed about him with a doubtful air, as though he half suspected that a plain-clothes detective might arrest him at any moment. And then, quite suddenly, he smiled. I knew that smile; it was the one that he reserved for his latest victim.

"Here he is," he whispered. "I'll introduce you."

We were joined by a tall man in his late twenties, whom Grenant presented to me as John Charton. He spoke French as so many educated Englishmen do—with fluency of grammar and vocabulary but little regard for accent and none for intonation. He was a retiring, rather shy person and had little enough to say at first, until Grenant introduced the favourite subject. Then he at once fired. But after a brief discussion, he turned to me apologetically.

"Excuse me, m'sieur," he said politely. "I am sure I am boring you. There is nothing more boring than another man's shop."

"On the contrary, I was—and am—very interested. In a way, I am in the same shop."

"M. Borodin is a medical student—surgery," Grenant explained. "I've been telling him about your work."

"My work?" Charton looked surprised and laughed shortly in embarrassment. "It's not that in the sense you mean. I'm here only to study. Your country or France, rather," he added, as though in deference to me, "leads the world in scientific criminology. Not even America has a Dr. Locard or anything like his laboratory. His work on poroscopy alone is a masterpiece of research."

I turned the subject quickly. For a while we chatted indifferently, and then in some curious way—who can predict the course of conversations, in spite of all that the Freudians

say?—it veered round to dives and night clubs and thence to the *Rien a Faire*, of which Charton did not know. He seemed interested.

"Of course," he said, "there's absolutely nothing in Lombroso's theory of the criminal type or the criminal countenance, but I always find contact with actual criminals interesting. It brings a breath of fresh air into one's thought to discover they are men and women like oneself. The psychology of crime always fascinates me. I must go to your *Rien a Faire*—what a delightfully ironic name!—some time. Will you tell me how one gets there?"

I found myself taking to this quiet enthusiast. I promised eagerly that I would personally conduct him to the *Rien a Faire* and introduce him to Red Jack and such of the night's customers as I knew; and I told him how I had been introduced to its inner councils, as it were. He chuckled.

"That was a chance in a thousand. I wish it had happened to me, yet I doubt whether I should have had the courage to take it. We English are so very conventional; in spite of all our progress we can never altogether forget to be respectable."

It was my turn to chuckle, and then and there we fixed a date. It would make a change to have a new companion. Grenant looked on glumly, a little disgruntled that I had, as it were, stolen both his thunder and his new discovery. Neither of us suggested he should come, and we ignored his vague hints. Poor Grenouille! He was cheated then of the fruits of his greatest piece of discernment—thought it was probably sheer luck. Since I have come to England I have made a discovery; John Charton is one of the most brilliant of the younger medical jurists in the country, but I doubt whether Grenouille, wherever he may be now, knows of it. I wonder what he is doing; the Paris of the German occupation can hardly have room for professional students and discoverers of discoverers in its Sorbonne.

Chapter 20

MALNA'S HOBBY

NATURALLY I was not neglecting Malna all this time. On the contrary, I admitted to myself that my interest in the whole affair centred on her. But for her, in fact, I think I should have packed my bags and, degree or no degree, left Paris for good. It was a pretty sordid business, when one came to consider it in cold blood, and I was not quite sure how I stood, legally at any rate. The law has always been a mystery to me; so many of the things that seem to me reprehensible are legal and vice versa; and, I think, all countries are much the same in this respect. I have to confess that I was growing a little fearful of the consequences to myself, and my fear was not dispersed by the thought that whatever happened Malna was bound to come into it, for she was associated with both sides, as it were. Of course, Gougloff might be right with his innuendoes. She might be merely her father's tool and emissary trying to trap me into supporting him. That thought did occur to me again and again, but each time I rejected it. I could not believe that there was nothing sacred or pure in life.

Now and again I made attempts to draw Malna out, and she was always quite innocent and frank about everything. I think, with that queer insight of hers, she knew of my suspicions and doubts, but now she did not use them as a whip with which to scourge me. At times she herself looked scared and worried, and that only increased my sense of fear.

I saw her on the evening of the day on which I was installed in the laboratory. We supped together and the greater part of what we said is of no interest in this chronicle. One thing, however, remains in my memory—

"So you are likely to have changes," I remarked. I had told her about my being taken off demonstrations and put into the laboratory in place of Gougloff, and she had merely nodded as though she wanted to forget all about that side of my life.

"Changes?" She looked up quickly and with what seemed to me genuine surprise.

"Yes. Your father warned me not to be surprised if I found him packing up as he was thinking of taking a larger place so as to have more room for patients."

She shook her head. "It's the first I've heard of it. Perhaps it was one of his jokes. He says things like that sometimes."

I could hardly imagine Vardarma joking, except in a very grim and unpleasant way. If there is cruelty in all laughter, as someone, I forget whom, has said, Vardarma's laughter was all cruelty.

"No," I rejoined; "I don't think so. He seemed serious enough to me. Besides he had already tidied his desk . . ."

"Oh! That!" She laughed. "I did that for him. I couldn't stand that mess and muddle any longer. It creates such a bad impression on visitors, though I know scientists are supposed to be like that. In a week's time it will be quite normal again—never fear."

"Well, I hope it will be like that."

"Frightened of losing me?" She laid her hand on my knee below the table-cloth. "Oh, George, I wish I could be sure that that was what you were thinking."

"Of course it is."

"Then don't worry. In any case, I shall not go far from you." She said it wistfully and in some mysterious way my comfort at her ignorance grew shot with uneasy suspicion. If Vardarma was moving to a larger clinic, as he had said, then I should be going with him. Perhaps it was true that Malna knew nothing of that plan; perhaps it had been invented entirely for my information. Perhaps, too, he had other schemes of departure in mind, as Gougloff and I suspected, and that Malna knew of them and was making secret plans of her own to be near me—plans that, obviously, she could not discuss.

I longed to put the whole question to her, to tell her everything, but I could not. Did she know of Grenant and his idiotic threats? No; it was not possible to talk to her about those things. There was an implicit barrier between us all the time. So far could we go and then the barrier came down. It would have been cruel, too, to press her at that time. She was very tired, and she left me early after we had tried to forget our

secret distrust of each other in a spate of tender words that made us feel dizzy.

In the next few days I almost forgot the whole nightmare. Malna and I met every day, both inside and outside her father's house. She was charming every time and we never mentioned the problems of our equivocal relationship. But she was also unusually timid and clinging as though pursued by some secret terror. There was something pathetic in the way in which this girl had changed so abruptly from poise and self-confidence to utter dependence on me. If, during those few days, I had been presented with convincing evidence of her complicity with her father in all his nefarious practices, I would have done nothing, except comfort her as best I could and rally to her defence. If it was part of a plan to reduce me completely, it succeeded. I did not think so, but I could not resist playing with the idea. The seeds Gougaloff, with his doubting mind, had planted, had grown into strong clinging parasite plants that would not be uprooted. I loathed Gougaloff with all the intensity one reserves for people whose judgment one suspects may be better than one's own.

When I look back on those few days I think of them, for all their recurring doubts, as an interlude of peace. The eye of the cyclone was passing over me, but I did not realize it. In a very short time, the storm was to blow again with redoubled fury and from a quite unexpected direction. Meanwhile, Malna remained; and with her came happiness all the more precious because it had to be fought for in the face of odds.

Chapter 21

THE FORMULA

IT WAS on the Friday that the new phase began. I cannot recall exactly what happened by way of overture. It may have been that Vardarma had not given me the capsules with which to prepare the anti-toxin, and that is what I am inclined to believe, though I have a vague memory of seeing the familiar little pile

lying in a watch-glass on the bench. But it does not matter. The point is that, for one reason or another, I went to Vardarma's study and, getting no reply to my knock, walked in.

Vardarma was not there, but Gougloff was. He was bending over the desk mumbling to himself, so absorbed in what he was doing that he did not look up when I entered. I remember cursing him for a clumsy fool. I had not come in quietly; in fact I had made a noise in order to warn Vardarma in case he had not heard my knock. Yet here was that crazy fool oblivious to my presence, which might much more easily have been Vardarma's.

Even when I drew closer to see what he was up to, he did not disturb himself. His mumblings and intentness were easily explained. He was trying to memorize something from a small, shabby black notebook. I did not need to be told what the book was. Gougloff had told me of it; this must be the repository of the famous formula. But what was it doing there? Gougloff had said Vardarma always carried it with him.

"Have you got it?" I asked excitedly, for the moment forgetting all my caution.

He looked at me triumphantly, apparently not at all surprised to find me at his elbow.

"Yes," he whispered. "I was right. I've got it and . . ."

"Then either take it or put it back and get out," I hissed, suddenly aware of movements in the house. Our position was foolhardy. If Vardarma came in now, no one could predict the upshot. Those powerful hands working in response to the unleashed violence of that temper would be more than a match for both of us. I had a mental image of Vardarma's giant form crashing down on us, as menacing and implacable as a landslide.

Gougloff looked at me dumbly.

"Quick!" I cried. "Put it back before he comes in."

"Let it go now I've found it? You're on his side . . ."

"I'm on no one's side but my own, and I'm more concerned for my neck at this moment than all the formulae in the world. You know where it is. Come back some other time when he's away and copy it down."

He nodded reluctantly. "Yes. All right."

But even then he would not put it down. He flipped the leaves and peered inside the cover and returned again and again to the page he had been studying when I entered.

"Quick, you fool, or I'll take it myself."

I laid my hand on his shoulder. It was enough. He dropped the book into an open drawer and pushed it to. In a flash, I seized his arm and dragged him from the room. We were only just in time. I had just reseated myself at the bench when Vardarma came into the laboratory. I congratulated myself on our escape, for Vardarma's face was far from kindly. He glowered at Gougaloff, who was still rather flushed and excited.

"So you're here," growled Vardarma. "I've been looking all over the clinic for you. Who said you might come here, and what are you looking so excited about? Has he been drivelling again, Borodin?"

"I've been paying no attention to him," I replied, staring at the apparatus in front of me.

"It's the best thing to do. I'm glad to see you're learning."

Suddenly he leapt forward and, taking Gougaloff by the shoulder, shook the unfortunate chemist with such violence that I began to debate the necessity of interference.

"I'll have this out with you here and now," roared Vardarma. "Don't you go and say that I bullied you in private, you scurvy little sneak-rat. Borodin shall hear every word."

He flung Gougaloff from him. Gougaloff fell against the wall, where he remained, half standing, half kneeling, taking deep breaths and staring at Vardarma with terror-stricken eyes.

"You're the sort of man who repays good with evil," went on Vardarma with a fierceness unusual even for him. "I took you out of the gutter where you belong and gave you a good job, and you did all you could to ruin me. When at last I saw you were only a mean-minded little skunk, I still didn't sack you, as I ought. No; I didn't even turn you over to the police when I heard how you'd tried to blackmail me and hadn't the courage to do it yourself but set that fool Grenant on me. I've treated you well, Gougaloff. And what do you do? What do you do? Do you say to yourself: 'Vardarma is a good man. He is my protector. He is generous and has overlooked my

shortcomings. At the least I can from now on do my best for him in the clinic?' Do you say that? No."

He stood over the half prostrate Gougloff, leant over him, and with one hand pulled him roughly to his feet with a single movement. It was a terrifying demonstration of animal strength. He held Gougloff up so that he could look into his victim's eyes. What Gougloff saw there I do not know. I saw a look of panic spread over the tortured face and the mouth half open as though to scream.

"Now, then, Borodin. Listen to this. I go into the clinic to see No. 8. You know what progress No. 8 was making. He was due for discharge in a few days' time. He was to be one of my greatest successes. That is true, isn't it?"

I nodded non-committally. No. 8 was a case of abdominal cancer. I had seen the improvement. I knew also that he had been in the clinic three weeks and that his time was therefore drawing near.

"I gave him into your charge, rat," he snarled, shaking Gougloff again. "I admit I was a fool. You know only one thing—hate. To discharge your hate for me, you have killed him."

His voice filled the room, echoing and re-echoing. A grim silence followed the words. Gougloff licked his lips and a very curious expression spread over his face. It was half terror, more extreme than anything I had ever seen; but even more remarkable was the look of astonishment. I was at a loss to understand it. Fear I could understand; astonishment at anything Vardarma might do or say, however unexpected, was by now beyond me.

For a full minute, Vardarma glared at Gougloff, who hung loosely in his powerful grip; then he contemptuously tossed the man from him.

"You're just a shade too clever, my friend," he said. "Too clever and not clever enough. I can see your little game. You think that one failure counts more than a hundred successes, and if it gets about that I've had one death people will start whispering that Vardarma's method is not so wonderful after all. And just because I've never let you into the secret fully!

I know, I know. What would you have done if I had?" His lip curled like a wild beast's. "Sold it to someone as soon as my back was turned. Listen, you poor little cretin; it's no good your trying to match your petty wits against Vardarma's. I can deal with anything you start. If this gets about—that we had a patient die—I shall tell the truth: I unwisely put my trust in an assistant who let me down. Oh yes, I can deal with you."

He swung his clenched fist as though to strike Gougaloff, and Gougaloff cringed. Vardarma laughed shortly—he would have made an ideal member of the Gestapo—and walked quickly to the door, where he paused to throw a last malignant glance at Gougaloff. Then he went out.

Gougaloff shook himself and slowly dusted his clothes. He looked very woebegone, but the terror was already passing from his eyes. It was always like that: he seemed to feel no fear except when Vardarma was actually present. I kept silent, for I knew that to speak now would only be to provoke some irrelevant outburst. Left to himself he might make some statement.

He did. My tact and patience were rewarded. He smiled at me with an air of knowing secrecy.

"You see, Borodin?" he said. "He's got a plan afoot, and I think I can see what it is. We shall have to be quick. What a fool I was not to take that book; he couldn't have treated me worse than he has. I'll come round to your rooms this evening, Borodin, to speak to you. It's important."

"But . . ." I had visions of Malna paying an unexpected visit. It was hardly likely that Vardarma would not tell her his own version of whatever had happened, and I was afraid. Perhaps if I had known the truth, I might have been more resolute, but I was torn between a desire to hear Gougaloff's explanation and the risk of antagonizing Malna. He sensed it.

"Oh, of course, I forgot who comes to see you there. Very well, Borodin. You come to mine."

I did not know where he lived, and he scribbled the address on a bottle label that was lying on the bench. Then, without another word, he went out.

Chapter 22

PATIENT NO. 8

GOUGALOFF'S ROOMS were small, untidy and shabby. He obviously looked on them as somewhere in which to eat and sleep and read, and nothing else. Nor did the concierge help. There was thick dust everywhere, and I brushed the seat of the old armchair carefully before I accepted his invitation to sit in it.

"You see which way the wind is blowing?" he asked, without preamble. There was no need for him to explain. I knew well enough that he thought of nothing but Vardarma.

"I'm blessed if I do," I replied. "I only know that something queer's going on, and I'd rather be out of it."

"Ah! You don't know Vardarma as well as I do. He's only shown his pretty side to you so far. Besides, it's in your interest not to cross his path too often. I know." He lit a cigarette. "All right. I'm not going to say anything more about that; I don't care any more. But surely you can see how it is? You know his patients die after three weeks. Has he ever admitted that one has died before?"

"I know you say they die, though I can't prove it myself. All the same I think I believe you. You're right when you say he's never admitted an unsuccessful case before."

"And how does he do it? He accuses me—me! I knew all about No. 8. I was expecting him to be discharged, as Vardarma puts it, a couple of days ago. Now listen, Borodin. You must believe me—trust my word absolutely. I never gave an injection or anything to No. 8 in my life. I swear it. And when I went into his ward this morning first thing, I found him dead. More than that, Vardarma had been there—or someone had—and laid him out properly with a bandage under his jaw."

"I see. All that outburst was to put the blame on you?"

He nodded. "Yes. But don't run away with the idea that Vardarma wants anything with me personally. I know I'm too small for him to worry much about." He said this quite without bitterness. "No. I'm just a pawn in the game, and if I guess right, that's all you are or, at any rate, will be."

"What have I to do with it?"

He smiled craftily. "I don't know for sure, of course," he replied, "but I think I've a pretty good idea. I know how that devil's mind works. He doesn't care who goes so long as his own hide is safe. He said he'd tell the truth—the truth, mind you! That'll be that I killed the patient by unskilful treatment and you made a mess of preparing the anti-toxin. He'll fake some up for examination—you see! We'll be sent to prison, and he'll go scot-free. He'll use it as a way of escape. This place is getting a bit too hot for him, I believe. He doesn't pay any attention to Grenant, don't worry about that, but it's made him see what a risky position he's in. He'll make a gesture and wash his hands of the country that's let him down."

I did not know whether to take Gougaloff seriously or not. He was very earnest, but it was only guesswork, after all. He had nothing but his own imagination to go on, and that was morbid whenever Vardarma was concerned. I thought a little and then the weak spots in his arguments occurred to me.

"That's all very well, Gougaloff," I said, "but it wouldn't work. He's responsible for you as his assistant. You're not qualified so he has to be, and he can't start accusing you without accusing himself."

Gougaloff smiled condescendingly. "That won't worry him. He'll get round that. I tell you I know Vardarma. He couldn't very well raise the question of qualifications, if you ask me. I don't think he has any. I'm certain now that he stole the formula, and he couldn't explain it properly if you asked him."

"I'd never do that," I interjected hastily. "But why are you so sure about it?"

Again the crafty smile spread over his face. "I know," he replied darkly. "It's not guesswork."

"Listen, Gougaloff, I'm in this with you. We sink or swim together. It's not fair to withhold information from me if you've got anything definite."

"Oh! I didn't know you wanted to be hung, drawn and quartered. What about Malna? You say this now, but when you've been with her you'll be telling me I'm mad."

"Leave her out of it." The thought of Malna was at the

back of my mind all the time. I could not find out or even get a hint as to whether she was her father's accomplice or not. At times she seemed to know far too much for my peace of mind, while at others she showed an innocence that appeared wholly genuine. "Leave her out," I repeated. "It's not any good fogging ourselves with side issues."

He raised his eyebrows. "Side issues? I thought it was the main issue with you."

"It's a side issue to what we're discussing," I retorted. "If you hope to throw me off by talking about it, you're mistaken. I want to know why you're so certain Vardarma stole the formula."

He pursed his lips. "I'll tell you, then. I was looking at that notebook. What a fool you are, Borodin—what a cowardly fool! Another couple of minutes and I'd have had that formula stuck in my memory. As it is, I can only remember bits of it. In a couple of minutes . . ."

" . . . Vardarma would have found you in the study with the book in your hand, and then it wouldn't have mattered to you whether you'd memorized it or not." I recalled the murderous look on Vardarma's face when he had found Gougaloﬀ. My allusion to it seemed to scare him a little. He moistened his lips.

"Perhaps you're right. You may be. All the same . . ."

"Tell me how you know he stole the formula," I insisted. "Don't keep side-tracking."

"That notebook had other things in it besides the formula," Gougaloﬀ replied, obviously resolved to hold his secret till the last moment. "Some of it was quite personal, like little accounts."

"Well?"

"None of it was in Vardarma's writing," Gougaloﬀ declared impressively. "You know how characteristic his handwriting is—it's big and bold and flamboyant like himself. This was neat, almost illegible. Besides, the notes were in German."

"I don't know about the writing," I said doubtfully, feeling that perhaps after all Gougaloﬀ had found something important, "but I don't see why it shouldn't be in German. Malna

told me Vardarma isn't French—he's Egyptian or something. If he didn't use his native tongue, he might just as well write in German. He must be able to read German or the formula would be no use to him, anyway."

"Anyone who knew a little chemistry would understand the formula," Gougloff returned, not in the least put out. "It's really quite simple, but there's a lot of it and it takes some remembering. But it's not his book. It's got a name in the cover. A German name in it."

"Oh!" This was more convincing. I could not see how to get round it, though I wanted to. Gougloff always had that effect on me. However I might want to agree with him, I invariably found myself on the defensive, trying to pick holes in what he said. I did not like to admit to myself that perhaps my attitude arose from Malna's suggestions.

"I'd swear the name was in the same writing as the rest of the book. You can't say that Vardarma bought it second-hand."

I could not help chuckling at Gougloff's absurd suggestion, though the laugh was against me. That notebook was the sort of thing you buy for a few pence.

"What was the name?"

"That's just what I can't remember," Gougloff replied with a worried frown. "I only glanced at it just before I put the book back. You know how it is: you think at the time 'I shall remember that all right'—like an address or a telephone number—but later it's gone completely out of your head."

"It doesn't matter."

I suddenly recalled that it was Friday evening and it was on that day I had arranged to take the Englishman to the *Rien a Faire*. I looked at my watch. I had only a little while before I was due at his hotel to collect him.

"We'd better be quick, Gougloff," I said. "I've got an appointment I can't miss. I must go in five minutes."

"I see," he retorted bitterly. "You've got to run away and spend the evening with *her*. I suppose you'll tell her all about it."

"If you're talking of Malna, it isn't Malna, and even if it were I wouldn't say a word." I was getting a little involved.

"How do I know it isn't Malna?"

I told him, with elaborate sarcasm, exactly what my plans were, but he refused to believe me. I could see the doubt peeping out of his eyes.

"Oh, come with me," I said in a sudden fury, expecting that to silence him. To my surprise he nodded, and looked round for his hat.

Chapter 23

OLD ACQUAINTANCE

JOHN CHARTON did not seem to resent my bringing an unexpected third to the party. He tried to engage Gougaloff in conversation, but Gougaloff had retired into himself and said no more than was necessary. I think perhaps he was regretting his decision to come, especially as everything seemed to be exactly as I had told him. Once or twice, as he took a preliminary drink with Charton, he seemed on the point of excusing himself, but no doubt the thought that I was playing a trick on him and would leave Charton for Malna as soon as he was out of sight restrained him.

Resentful of the impulse that led me to invite him, I conducted the two to the *Rien a Faire*. Charton looked about him with quiet interest, while Gougaloff, to whom the place was also quite new, stared in obvious curiosity. I looked for Jacques Rouge, but he was not to be seen. This was serious. I wanted Charton to meet the old rogue, and if he was not there it meant an evening wasted—and probably I should have to desert Malna again and spend another night in the dive.

A moment or two later my fears were relieved. Jacques Rouge entered the room and cast a keen glance round. I think he always kept a mental inventory of who was present so that he should always be ready to answer police inquiries. If inquisitive detectives came and asked him where X was at such and such a time, he would always be prepared to swear that X was in the *Rien a Faire*—provided his memory told him that,

wherever X was, it was not at the *Rien a Faire*. In this way, criminals had a ready alibi, though not perhaps a very valuable one. The mere fact that the police asked Red Jack about X was information that the alibi was desired.

His face lit up when he saw me and he hurled himself towards me. He looked at my two companions and seemed puzzled.

"The beautiful lady?" he asked, spreading his hands. "She is not here? She does not like the *Rien a Faire*?"

"On the contrary, she was delighted with it," I replied, smiling. "But she is not with me to-night. We cannot live in paradise all the time."

"That is true, too true," he agreed philosophically. "And it is better that we cannot. Too much of anything is bad for you—even paradise."

"I have two friends to present to you, you old rogue," I went on. I introduced Gougaloff first, because he was the less important. After I had presented Charton, I added: "M. Charton is an Englishman and he is very anxious to see this place. He wants to collect raw material."

I saw the old villain's eyes light up. No doubt he thought Charton was a tourist out sensation hunting. Red Jack was no doubt considering how he could pass off some of his 'champagne' with the elegantly forged labels with profit to himself and without embarrassing me.

"But don't run away with ideas, Jacques," I warned. "He is not a tourist. He is a doctor and some day perhaps will be a barrister also. He studies crime and criminals—where better could I bring him for his studies than here?"

This, which might have been insulting to another, caused Jacques to puff out his chest with pride.

"Indeed where? Is this not the place where the most successful gentlemen and ladies of wit are to be seen." He leaned forward confidentially, with his hands splayed on the table, and addressed Charton.

"You are in luck, m'sieur," he said. "There are several notables here to-night. You see that gentleman with the benevolent bald head and the white whiskers? He looks like a member of the Academy, does he not? But I, Red Jack, have

but to whisper the word—and, *voilà*, the police know who stole the Comtesse de Vauillon's diamonds and Madame Loirette's emeralds. You see, m'sieur, they trust me, as I know I can trust any friend of *le petit docteur's*."

I was about to break in on this outrageous discourse when I caught the twinkle in Charton's eye. He was enjoying it—and, rightly, not believing a word of it.

"And that lady, m'sieur. She is perhaps not so young as she might be, but she still has looks, and, *mon Dieu*, what a figure! Later, perhaps, she will dance and you will see. You know, m'sieur"—he lowered his voice still more—"she has had one, two, three, four, five husbands. Each has made his will leaving everything to her—and then he has died quietly in his sleep with a smile of infinite happiness on his face. No one, not even the police, could think of murder in the face of such a smile. Death is an unhappy business, m'sieur, that all of us have to go through at one time or another, and who should deny a man the chance to die happy with such a look on his face?"

"You are a philosopher, m'sieur," said Charton politely.

"A man has to be. How else can he overcome undeserved misfortune or be able to contemplate the suffering of the world with resignation?"

"He is an old humbug," I put in, grinning broadly. "He polishes up these stories for chance visitors on the look-out for sensation. But you are bringing your goods to the wrong market. M. Charton will not believe those lies. He knows all the secrets of the Sûreté and is going to Lyons to confer with the famous Dr. Locard as an equal."

"So?"

"But there's no need to be alarmed. He is not a detective. All this is his study. But he wants facts, not romances."

"I will listen to anything M. Jacques cares to tell me," Charton said with a faint smile. "M. Jacques is an artist. If he sees people not perhaps as they are but idealized, has he not the same sort of vision as Rembrandt?"

"M'sieur!" Red Jack gasped. He had not expected anything like that, and I myself was surprised at hearing such an outburst from an Englishman of all people; Englishmen, I had been told,

and those I had met confirmed it, were taciturn and phlegmatic and, above all, knew nothing of art.

"He is always the same, Charton," I said, to break an awkward pause. Jacques was overwhelmed and could do nothing else but bow. It was the first and only time I had ever seen him knocked off his balance. "He has a new story for me every time I come here; and not one of them has been true."

"That is not so," retorted Jacques, recovering his aggressiveness. "With you, I can be honest. If I tell the tourists what they want to hear, who can blame me? It is no worse than serving *petit vin* in straw-covered bottles and calling it Chianti. They do not know the difference, and it is my desire to give pleasure and happiness to all. I do not lie to you, *m'sieur le docteur*. Last time you came here I served you with the finest champagne in all Paris. I told you also a story that was true in every detail."

I looked at him sharply. "About the doctor?"

He nodded. "Yes, *m'sieur*. I wished to talk to you about it. Perhaps it embarrassed you. I am sorry. But the name—it hit me here"—he pressed his head—"and I could not help myself. You said that perhaps I was mistaken in the name—but no. A name like that sticks. It is uncommon. Listen, *m'sieur*. Because you doubted, I have thought of it over and over again, and each time I see the details more distinctly. I am sure of the man, sure of the name. Vardarmal! Is it likely I should forget it?"

Gougaloff's eyes narrowed. He knew the story, of course. I was helpless. I knew that any effort to stop whatever was coming from Red Jack would be fruitless.

"It was a most curious case. I myself believe that this Vardarma killed that poor old doctor. Next time I was in Algiers I made inquiries. They told me the doctor was mad and that this Vardarma, with his huge black beard, was his assistant. The doctor worked night and day at finding some cure or other. That, I expect, is why people said he was mad. They are indeed mad, these people, but is it not also true that madmen are saints?"

I looked at my companions, both of whom appeared intensely

interested. There was a glitter in Gougloff's eyes I did not like. Now, he was not regretting having come to the *Rien a Faire*. I could almost feel the tautness of his emotions.

"Certainly this Vardarma had run away from something—I do not know what. But when I made inquiries, it seemed his employer, the old doctor, had been stabbed to death, and that an Arab servant had been adjudged guilty of the crime. No one believed it. They all said it was this Vardarma, for the Arab had denied it to the last. They said, too, that he had stolen the fruit of the old doctor's life work. Besides that . . ." Red Jack suddenly broke off and stared at me. "Yes, *m'sieur le docteur*, it is true, all of it. They told me this Vardarma had a very beautiful young daughter and . . ."

His voice trailed away. It must have been my look, for I stared at him with an expression that must have been concentrated malignancy. I lowered my gaze and murmured an apology, and Red Jack, that understanding man, smiled and bowed.

"I am sorry, *m'sieur*; I should have remembered."

"It is nothing," I said heavily. "Jacques, if that story is true, you ought to tell it to the police. There ought to be some sort of inquiry to discover whether your Vardarma is the same as the man who is holding the eye of all fashionable and scientific Paris. It is a duty you owe to the State."

"To the State?" He laughed uproariously. "I—a duty to the State? That is good, *m'sieur*. What other people do is no concern of mine. As for telling the police, does the cat warn the mouse that the owl is about? No, no; if I was so much as seen whispering to a policeman, I should lose all my friends. The *Rien a Faire* would be no more. In truth, Jacques Rouge and *rien a faire* would be the same."

Gougloff leant forward. "Tell me, M. Jacques, can you remember the name of the old doctor who was killed?"

Jacques shook his head. "Of the people I meet, I remember the names always. Their faces, too. If you come here in ten, fifteen, twenty years time, and I, by God's mercy, am still alive, I shall greet you: '*Bon soir*, M. Gougloff.' But those I do not meet, they have no interest for me. I do not remember. All I can say is that it was not a French name."

I had not been paying very much attention to this conversation, for I had been watching Charton. He had been fidgeting for some time, and I had suspected him of being bored, but then I realized it was not boredom but discomfort. He was actually looking embarrassed. Suddenly he turned to Jacques.

"When did all this happen?" he asked sharply but politely.

"M'sieur asks me a difficult question. So much happens in my life that dates confuse me."

"Five years ago?"

Jacques considered. Then he smiled broadly.

"M'sieur must know something about me. Yes, it may well have been. It was five years ago when I worked on the Marseilles boat."

"You would know the doctor's name if you heard it?"

"I think so." Jacques began to look puzzled, and so did I. I knew Charton had a passion for crime—its study was his work—but his questions seemed spurred by a more personal interest than a technical one. Gougloff, too, was eyeing him in obvious surprise.

Charton stared at the table-cloth and began to compress a bread crumb into a tight pellet. All of us waited in silence. Something surprising was going to happen: I was sure of it; and the expressions on the others' faces showed that they thought likewise.

"It was a German name," he murmured to himself, but just loud enough for us to hear. "Grun something. Grunbaum? No." His brow creased.

Gougloff leant forward eagerly; his eyes were ablaze.

"Grunholtz!" he exclaimed. "Carl Friderich Grunholtz."

Charton nodded. "Yes. I believe it was. But . . ." He stared at Gougloff. "Do you know all about this, too?"

"I think all of us know a great deal too much," I put in quickly, anxious to forestall any revelations Gougloff might feel inclined to make. "But we'd better clear this up. Was that the name, Jacques?"

Jacques nodded; he was quite bewildered. "But yes, m'sieur. I was about to suggest it when M. Gougloff spoke. It seems my story is not my story." He was disappointed in a pathetic

way, like a child whose toy has been taken away from it for the amusement of its parents.

Charton rose abruptly and looked at me. "I'm sorry about this, Borodin," he said apologetically. "It's rather spoilt the evening for me, and I don't quite understand. Still, I owe you an explanation for my discourtesy in leaving you so soon." He was determined to go. "Can I call on you to-morrow morning to talk to you?"

I thought quickly. I dare not take time off from Vardarma's with the present suspicions in the air.

"I'm very busy in the morning, I'm afraid. Could you make it lunch?"

"Thank you very much."

I named the Chez Georges as the rendezvous and he departed with barely another word. I did not accompany him; quite clearly he was upset and wanted to be alone. At the door he turned and half smiled. Perhaps it was a compliment to my tact—or what he thought was my tact, for, if the truth be told, I was so astounded at the turn of affairs that I was almost incapable of movement.

Chapter 24

PETIT DOCTEUR

THERE WAS an awkward silence when he had gone. At last I turned to Jacques.

"See what you and your stories have done," I cried. "You have driven my friend away, and spoilt an evening's amusement for both of us. And you're almost as much to blame, Gougaloff; you led Jacques on."

I was angry more with myself than the others—angry at Fate, which could not let me have a few hours' respite from the shadow of Vardarma. That evil man seemed to have riveted himself to my soul. I was like Sinbad with the Old Man of the Sea on my back or—more appropriately—like Faust with the Devil waiting to claim him. I vented my feelings on Jacques

and Gougaloff for the same reason as a child smacks the table on which it has barked its shin.

Jacques looked thoroughly woebegone and seemed on the verge of tears.

"But how was I to know, *petit docteur*?" he asked miserably. "I told my story straightforwardly because I thought you would be interested. This Englishman—he seemed to have some private information. I am not to blame for that."

I was struck with sudden contrition. "Of course not, Jacques. I'm sorry I spoke like that. It was just bad temper. Perhaps I can induce him to come here again and see you and the *Rien a Faire*, as I like to remember it with its proprietor as my friend." I smiled at the look of relief that passed over his face. "Now I must go. What about you, Gougaloff?"

"I'll come with you."

Jacques showed us out, still full of apologies interspersed with smiles as I told him that no apologies were necessary. Gougaloff walked by my side in moody silence. It was not till our ways parted that he spoke.

"You see?" he demanded, as we paused to say good night. "I was right. He killed the doctor and stole the formula. But he does not understand. He robbed the man of his life and his work, and now he is robbing the public by robbing our brains. Of course, it was the name Grunholtz I saw written in the notebook."

"I guessed that. If Charton has anything interesting to say, I'll tell you."

He nodded and walked off.

I did not feel like going home to bed. I wanted action, movement, anything that might serve to distract my thoughts; yet I could not escape them. For three hours I walked the streets, oblivious alike of the ladies of the town who tried to attract my attention—why else, they wondered no doubt, with sane logic, should a man patrol the streets alone at night?—and the light drizzle that quickly developed into a downpour. I did not realize I was soaked through to the skin until I was back in my rooms.

The whole business was incredible. Jacques Rouge had met

Vardarma: I had always been sure of that, for there could not be two people with the same characteristics and the same name. But it was a mystery how Charton should recall the name of Vardarma's former employer. Perhaps I might learn about that in the morning. In the meantime, my thoughts were not pleasant.

If Jacques were right, Vardarma was a murderer. Yet was he? I saw one loophole of escape, for always the memory of Malna led me to find excuses for her father. I hated the man, but I knew that in some curious way Malna loved him; and anything she loved had my respect if it could not command my affection. My argument was based on the fact that Vardarma made no attempt at disguise. He used what was presumably his own name, and anyhow the name by which he had been known in Algiers. He had made no attempt to alter an appearance that was striking, to say the least; he had not even shaved off the beard, which had engraved itself so deeply into Jacques' memory. Nor had Malna sought to disguise his connection with Algiers; it was she, in fact, who had told me most about it, and even Grenant had known of it.

Inevitably the counter-argument formed itself in my disordered, divided mind. It was just the sort of thing that Vardarma would do. Vardarma had a touch of caesaromania about him; he considered himself above all moral and legal codes, a law unto himself. He had tremendous courage and strength. He was safe; a man had been tried and found guilty of Grunholtz's murder. Vardarma would pay no attention to rumours. And what had Malna told me? She had said that there were stories about him—stories that were not very different from Jacques' surmises.

I breathed a sudden sigh of relief. Perhaps Malna had been so frank with me because she herself did not know the truth. She believed in her father, and when she seemed to be in league with him it might not be complicity in his evil designs but genuine innocence. Yes, that was it, I said to myself excitedly. Why hadn't I seen that before? She knew nothing, nothing. She trusted her father and believed him when he told her that the stories and calumnies she heard were malicious, jealous lies.

With this reassuring thought in my mind I flung myself on my bed. I did not care an onion skin for all this mystery. As long as Malna was innocent, that was all that mattered. At that moment I very nearly resolved to break my lunch appointment with Charton, so that I need not hear what he had to say; and I formed a crazy idea of going then and there to Malna and begging her to flee with me to England, to America, to the South Seas—anywhere to be away from all this. All the time, even when this idea held me most strongly, I had the uneasy feeling that Malna would not agree. Why should she if she believed her father innocent? I was certain, too, that if she thought any danger threatened him, she would stand by him to the last. Malna had courage and loyalty, however the latter might be misplaced; and I believe that if she had consented to leave it all and let her father face the future by himself, I should have despised her a little.

I lay awake in torture. My mind was split into two camps between which there was bloody war. I wanted to save Malna for her own sake and my own; I wanted, too, to bring down Vardarma. It was only then that I realized how much I hated him. Gougaloff was right; one grew to hate him without knowing it, and part of one's hate arose out of the fear that he inspired. For I was afraid of him; I had to admit it. I tried not to show it, I tried to battle with those commanding eyes and that overwhelming presence; but all the same I was afraid. Yet I was bound—doubly bound now—to help Gougaloff in his crazy schemes.

Resolutely I endeavoured to dismiss my emotions and consider the whole thing coolly and calmly. At last I persuaded myself that I must find out the facts first. Nothing had yet been proved against Vardarma. Everything was guesswork, even the effects of his cure. When at last I fell into a fitful slumber, I had convinced myself that until proof was forthcoming I could do nothing. I would start the very next day, and I would ask Charton's help. I would tell him everything. He claimed that he was a medical jurist. He was used to investigating with the police. Yes, Charton would, must, help me.

Chapter 25

A NEW THEORY

LUCKILY FOR me I did not see Vardarma the next morning. I was left in peace to prepare the anti-toxins. I was a little puzzled about the quantity Vardarma had ordered. I knew roughly how much he used for each patient, and it seemed to me he must be expecting an enormous influx of cases if he required this amount. The stuff soon deteriorated; after three weeks it was useless. What was in the wind?

My speculations were, of course, utterly futile, but they took my mind off the main problem that was worrying me. In working out all sorts of fantastic theories I grew so cheerful that when Gougaloff came in I was able to give a smile in exchange for his gloomy nod.

"So you're here?" he said, as though he had expected me to disappear. "Listen. I want to see you to-night. I can't talk here. Vardarma has forbidden me to come into the laboratory without his permission. Look, he's even given me a written order to you to let me have some anti-toxin. Give it to me quickly, and I'll go. If he finds me talking, he'll kill me."

I gave him the quantity named on the slip of paper, which I kept and laid aside. Gougaloff grabbed it and fled from the room. He was obviously scared stiff, and I wondered at the amazing contrast in him. At one moment he was subservient to Vardarma's slightest command; at another he had the courage to rifle Vardarma's desk and to run the risk of being found with the loot in his hands. I should never understand Gougaloff.

But there was little time left to think about Gougaloff. It was already turned half past twelve, and I was lunching with Charton at one. I put my things aside and started to tidy myself. At the same time I began to ask myself how I was going to take Charton into my confidence. He was an aloof, self-contained man—which was why his show of emotion the night before had been so astounding—and he did not encourage self-revelation. I decided to let him talk first and hope that I might get an opportunity.

He was waiting for me at Chez Georges and refused my invitation to an *apéritif*.

"No," he said. "Let's get a table and talk." He was still in a difficult mood—I could see that—and my hopes sank.

He did not speak again till our lunch had been set before us and the waiter had retired. Then he looked at me and made a wry face.

"I owe you an apology and an explanation," he said slowly; "that's why I'm here, of course. But it's dashed awkward to do. My conduct last night was really inexcusable. I shall have to rely on your generosity to forgive me."

"Not at all, not at all," I replied. "I can assure you there is nothing whatsoever to forgive." I tried to sound as if I wanted to dismiss the whole subject, though actually I was burnt up with curiosity. Besides, unless he talked he would not give me an opening, and I hoped that my dissimulation had not been too successful.

"That's good of you," he said, "and I wish I could leave it at that. I can't, however. I spoilt your evening, and I was intolerably rude in front of your friend. An explanation is due to you, at whatever cost."

He was obviously talking to gain time, to put off his mysterious explanation. I did not say anything, and stared at the table-cloth.

"It was that story, of course. It brought up rather unpleasant memories for me. But I've had time to think things over, and I can see now that I was very foolish. As a matter of fact, I think I ought to thank you, as well as apologize."

Curse him! I thought. If he spends so much time beating about the bush, my time will be up and nothing will have been done. He looked at me with a smile.

"I'm being very puzzling, I'm afraid. I'll be brief, and I won't waste any more time. It's just part of the old resistance. I think I was suffering from a fixation at an adolescent level. You are, of course, familiar with Freud?"

Of course I was, I fumed. What student of those days was not? I had heard Freud, talked Freud, read Freud, till I was heartily sick of the man's name. I did not want him

introduced into this. But I said nothing. I waited patiently.

"I'll cut that out, though I always like to have a theoretical basis for my beliefs about myself. Naturally, you won't be interested. Well, to put it all quite simply, your man Jacques recalled some memories to me. He conjured up a scene that I could see in every detail. You see, I was in Algiers about that time, and by chance I stumbled on to a case of murder. I was the first to examine the body—and a nasty sight it was. That body was this Dr. Grunholtz's."

I was astonished. I had heard of coincidences and the old cliché that the world was a small place; but this was beyond me.

Charton, however, went on quietly. "It was a very bad case, and the expert who saw it said it was quite typical of an Arab bashing or knifing. He knew what he was talking about, it seems, for he said he had seen them in Egypt and other places. . . ."

Egypt! I thought; and Vardarma was an Egyptian. My face evidently betrayed me.

"You look thunderstruck," said Charton. "Is it so very astonishing? After all, we ought never to be astonished at coincidences. The world . . ."

"Yes, yes! The world is a small place, I know. But what happened? Was there any evidence against anyone?"

He shrugged. "When they found out I was there I was taken along to their filthy police station for questioning, and they made the girl come along too . . ."

"The girl?"

He nodded. "Yes. She called me into the house—a friend or something. Poor kid, she was quite cut up, and little wonder. Nice looking girl, too. She was scared stiff."

"I see. Who was she?"

"I never found out. That's all I know. It wasn't the memory of that which upset me, you understand, but just that it was associated in my mind with other things I wanted to forget."

"Yes. But this is important. You know no more—no more at all?"

He shook his head. "I've tried to forget it, because of its

associations," he insisted. "Otherwise I might have followed the case."

"You do not mind it now?" I grasped at the opportunity.

"No. I've grown up." He smiled rather cynically.

"Listen, Charton *mon ami*," I went on excitedly, "will you do me a favour? It is something in your line. You know where to start and how to go to work. Will you find out all about this case for me? You heard what Red Jack said. He suspects that this man Vardarma he talked about killed your doctor. I must know the truth. It is vital to me. I work for a man who calls himself Vardarma, you see, and it's important for me to know the truth."

"Very important, I should imagine. But I don't see why you think it's the sort of thing I could undertake."

"You are a medical jurist and . . ."

"A medical jurist is not a detective," he replied, smiling; "and in any case I don't claim to be a medical jurist yet. I'm still learning. But never fear. I'll do it for you. I'm really as interested as you are."

"Good!" A great weight seemed to have been lifted from me. I wanted to get up and embrace Charton, but I remembered, just in time, that he was an Englishman. "I shall help you, of course, if I can."

"Thanks. I'll get out a report for you, and I think that will cover everything. It shouldn't be difficult to find out the facts. All right."

He would say no more about it, and after making several attempts to draw him out, I gave it up. I was interested particularly in his reference to the girl. If Vardarma was concerned with this, then to my mind that girl could be none but Malna; and if it was, she must know everything. Now I made a *volte face*. I began to regret having dragged Charton into this. He had wanted to forget; it would have been better to let him. I looked at his face. It was strong, unemotional, the sort of face that belongs to a man who will make no compromise with truth. I could imagine him giving his closest friend no mercy if facts incriminated him. No; he was not the sort of man to

whom one could delegate such a business, but the die was cast and I could not alter it.

When he left me, I was already in a state of terror. I could already see, in my mind's eye, the trim phrases of his report building up an unanswerable case against Vardarma—and against Malna. I was stupefied at my own stupidity. I liked Charton, but I knew nothing of him, after all. He was not a close friend of mine, certainly not a confidant; yet I had given him as delicate a mission as any I could think of. I had placed all my happiness in his hands. He might tear Malna from me—and I should not be able to complain, for it would have been at my bidding.

Bitter self-reproaches followed. I told myself that if I loved Malna it should not matter to me what she was or what she had done. She was still Malna, and that should be enough. I cursed this eternal distrust, this unceasing questioning, in our relations. I felt as though I was drawn to her against my will. A few minutes with Malna and perhaps I might forget everything. Yet even that I doubted. It was hell, hell.

Chapter 26

A BAD JOKE

AS SOON as I returned to the laboratory, Vardarma sent for me. I went to his study in some trepidation, and his first words put me on my guard. Gougaloff believed this man had eyes and ears everywhere. Suppose he had learnt about Red Jack, about my meeting with Charton, about my agreement with Gougaloff?

"Come in," he said as I opened the door. "Sit down. I sent for you earlier, but you were at lunch. Enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. It's as well to be fortified. Now I want to have a word with you about Gougaloff. I've suspected him for a long time. Now, as long as he was merely playing to get me into trouble, it didn't matter. In a fight between us I would always

come out on top, whether brains or muscle were needed. He's a rat, mentally and physically."

I did not like Vardarma's tone at all. He was being friendly, and I had reason to distrust that friendly manner. He was being threatening, too; perhaps he was threatening me as well as Gougaloff, letting me know exactly where I stood, and what I might expect if I tried to follow in Gougaloff's footsteps.

"He's gone too far, Borodin. You heard what I said? He's killed one of my patients. I had already written to that patient's wife, telling her to make ready for his return, and now I've got to write and tell her he's dead. He's interfered in something besides my affairs, Borodin—he's tampering with science, and I won't have it, Borodin; I won't have it."

His eyes contracted till they were no more than pin pricks, and his beard bristled. He looked quite ugly, then, and very evil. I shuddered inside, but eyed him coolly.

"I've been giving him enough rope to hang himself," he continued. "And, by God! he's practically done it literally. He's killed a man, and that's murder."

"I don't quite see what the legal position is," I protested. "If a patient is under treatment . . ."

"Don't argue, Borodin. It won't do you any good and it won't help Gougaloff. No. You forget he's unqualified. He exceeded my instructions. I can't take any responsibility for him."

"But . . ."

"Be quiet, or I shall think you're in league with him. You're not, are you?" He glared at me. With an effort I retained my composure.

"In league with him to kill your patients?" I laughed scornfully. "I'm not such a fool as that, doctor. I want to get my degree."

"Exactly. I warn you again to keep away from Gougaloff, or at any rate not to listen to him. Anyway, you won't have much chance to talk to him in future. I'm going to get rid of him. I'm tired to death with his ways."

"I see. I can't say I'm surprised." He could take it how he liked—either I was not surprised at his decision or I was not,

surprised at his being tired of Gougaloff. Vardarma looked at me keenly.

"I thought I'd better tell you. I told you you were going to replace him, and it's come a bit earlier than I expected. You'll be starting in the clinic to-morrow."

I shook my head. "No, Dr. Vardarma. I came here to demonstrate for you, and I agreed to do the work in the laboratory. But I will not serve in the clinic. If I were fully qualified I might do so, but what has happened to Gougaloff dissuades me. I might have an accident and then . . ." I snapped my fingers.

He roared with laughter. I had expected something very different. If his eyes had gone suddenly red and his great hands had clenched, I would not have been surprised. Yet here he was laughing as though I had made a good joke.

"Don't worry about that, Borodin. These mistakes don't often happen. You're careful. You know which side your bread is buttered. I'll see to it that there are no 'accidents,' as you call them." He gave me a curious look.

I was more astonished than ever. Was he trying to suggest that he had 'framed' Gougaloff and taking me into his confidence? Or was he giving me a warning? In either case, I did not like it.

"I must think this over," I said. "I've got my future to consider."

"So you have, so you have." Nothing would put him out. "I like you, Borodin. You're honest. Now Gougaloff would have mouthed to me about the sacredness of science and all that rubbish. But you, Borodin, you put it bluntly—you must think of your future. Well and good. Start with the immediate future. You're getting two thousand a month, aren't you? Shall we say four thousand, starting retrospectively from the first? A hundred per cent rise—not bad, eh?"

It was my turn to laugh. "I must still think of my future," I rejoined. "Even at four thousand a month, I can't afford 'accidents'."

"Go along," he said abruptly. "I'll talk to you again later."

I went. I had seen the danger signal in the pulse at his

temple. I did not resume my work. What had Vardarma been getting at, I wondered. Was he trying to buy me off—and if so, for what? Did he suspect how much I knew and want me to stand by silently while he dealt with Gougaloff? It seemed like it; but if it were that, it seemed very clumsy for Vardarma. I went home early, changed, and got ready for my evening's entertainment. Malna had gone into the country for a few days, and I had to go out as much as possible to forget her absence. I was just on the point of departing when Gougaloff walked in.

"What did Vardarma say this afternoon?" he demanded.

I looked at him in amazement.

"Oh, I know! He asked me where you were while you were at lunch. I didn't tell him you were discussing his crimes with that English fellow. That's what you did, I suppose? Murder and all that. I just said I didn't know, but supposed you were at lunch. I saw you go into his room soon afterwards, and I saw you come out. I wanted to go in there myself."

"You keep a good check on my movements," I said a little sarcastically. "Ought I to report to you when I come in and go out?"

"I don't care a damn whether you walk into the Seine or not. If you did, I wouldn't fish you out. Now then, what did he say? Trying to buy you over again? What was it this time—money?"

"I hardly know. He offered to double my salary . . ."

"There you are, you see. First Malna, now the cheque-book."

"But that was to compensate me for assuming a very risky position—in other words to take over your post in the clinic."

"My post in the clinic?" His eyes opened wide. "When?"

"At once was his plan. But I've put him off without actually refusing. I don't think he'll sack you till I've accepted."

"So that's it," muttered Gougaloff. "He must feel very sure of himself, and think me a useless sort of nitwit. Up to now he's been afraid to get rid of me, because while I was with him he could keep me quiet. I wonder what his game is?"

I should liked to have known myself, but I did not say so. Instead I told Gougaloff about Charton's story. I told him, too, of what I had asked Charton to do. .

"That's useless," he snapped. "You know all about it. Listen. I've traced Vardarma's record. He's a doctor, but only just. He scraped through his exams by the skin of his teeth. Then he left France."

"What else?"

"That's all."

This was interesting. It explained why Vardarma had not changed his name; he wanted to take advantage of his registration.

"Not very informative," I commented.

"No. But it proves he could have never discovered that formula. He killed Grunholtz and cleared out with it."

"He might have found Grunholtz dead and run off with the formula before anyone else discovered its existence."

"It might have been left to him in Grunholtz's will," he added sarcastically.

"Let's wait till Charton has reported," I suggested pacifically. "What did you want to see me about?"

"To tell you to keep out of this business," he returned promptly. "I don't trust you. For all I know, you may have suggested to Vardarma that I should go. You keep your nose out of it, and leave it all to me. I'll get the formula and you will be safe."

"You're very confiding for a man who doesn't trust me. How do you know I shan't run off and tell him all about it? He'd move the book to a safe deposit. You'd never get it there."

"I shall get it wherever it is."

"I envy you your self-confidence," I retorted. "If I could rifle safe deposits by faith, I should be a rich man by now."

"Take me to dinner with you," he said miserably, appealingly. I looked at him. He was cringing with fear. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. His lips were dry.

"Come and have a drink and some food," I said, not unkindly. "Your trouble is that you're too much alone and think too much. A little entertainment will buck you up."

He nodded and, as we descended the stairs, he took my arm in a very friendly way. He was an infuriating fellow; at one

time you hated him; at another you pitied him wholeheartedly; yet you could never be cruel to him for long. I told myself that my friends had a universally irritating way with them. Gougloff and Grenant would turn anyone's hair grey.

"Have you seen Grenouille lately?" I asked, my thoughts prompting the question.

"No. Last time we met he was still keen on blackmail, so I told him to shut up. He went away swearing that we were all fools."

I laughed. That was Grenant all over. He saw his own foolishness reflected in others.

As we entered Chez Georges, I caught sight of a man eating by himself. He seemed on the look-out for someone. That someone was apparently me, for he smiled and rose as I drew near. It was Charton.

"Come and feed with me," he said, "and you, M. Gougloff, as well. I took a chance on your coming in here, as they told me you were one of their most faithful customers."

"You've found out something?" I asked eagerly. "I have told Gougloff all about it. You see, he also works for Vardarma."

"We share hell between us," said Gougloff gloomily.

Charton laughed. "The respected Dr. Vardarma doesn't seem very popular," he remarked. "No, I've not found much. I'd no idea it was so difficult to trace things in Paris. Now, in London, I should have gone to the British Museum and found all the newspapers I wanted. Now here . . ."

"You do not know the ropes," I said.

"So it appears. When I got a friend from the Sûreté to help me, everything was ready in fifteen minutes. I could have commanded the whole of the Bibliothèque Nationale to be at my disposal."

"You brought in the Sûreté?" I asked, not without anxiety. I did not want official interest.

"Oh, not officially," he returned. "I told him I wanted certain papers, and he gave me an order telling a certain official to look after me. After that it was easy."

"And what did you find?"

"I studied the whole of the proceedings. There is nothing much now. The man was killed by a knife wound, but there were actually twenty-four in the whole body, most of them inflicted after death. That, it seems, is a hall-mark of an Arab's work. It ruled out any European, according to the authorities. So they concentrated on the servants and found one with a grudge against his master. He swore he was not in the house at the time and couldn't have been, and he produced ten relations who swore an alibi for him. But the magistrates don't take much notice of these things; you can buy sworn evidence all along the North African coast. He was found guilty and sent to prison for life."

"Anything about Vardarma?"

"Nothing important. Vardarma was the doctor's assistant, but no one knew much about him. He mixed the medicines and so on. He was not present at the trial, since he had left Algiers. I must say the evidence against the Arab prisoner was very unconvincing."

"It would be," growled Gougaloff. "Vardarma did it."

Chariton ignored this remark. "So you see, we're not much further on. I've never seen Vardarma, so I can't help. I must say it all looks fishy to me."

"He might have gone quite innocently. Perhaps he asked Red Jack to find him a passage because he could not afford the usual fare." I knew this was a silly thing to say, for Jacques would have demanded as much for a seat in the coal bunkers as the ship's owners would have charged for a cabin. I felt I had to excuse Vardarma somehow.

And then I saw Chariton start. He rose a little from his chair and dropped back, at the same time assuming the mask he usually wore. I turned round to see the cause of his surprise and saw . . . Malna. She approached the table with a smile on her face. I do not think she had seen Chariton.

"So I've found you, George," she said. "The concierge said this was as likely a spot as any. I see you have Gougaloff with you." Her glance travelled over him and came to rest on Chariton. I saw her eyes go cold and her face freeze into an artificial smile.

"This is M. Charton," I said quickly, presenting him.

The smile remained fixed. "How do you do, m'sieur?" she said, and turned to me. "I just wanted to let you know I was back, George," she said. "I will see you at the house to-morrow."

She hurried away.

I looked at Charton. His face was set.

"Well?" I asked.

"It is the same," he said quietly. "The same. She has a strange beauty that is more noticeable now she is older."

"The girl in Algiers?"

He nodded. "Who is she?"

Gougoloff chuckled hoarsely. "Mlle. Malna Vardarma," he said.

"Ah! I thought so."

Chapter 27

ALGERIAN MEMORY

I COULD deny the evidence no longer. My brain sought for a loophole of escape, but without success. There was the unusual name Vardarma. There was Red Jack's circumstantial description. There was the connection with Algiers and with this Dr. Grunholtz. And now Charton had recognized Malna. No, it was irrefutable. Vardarma had been in Algiers and left in a hurry, leaving behind a dead employer, for whose murder an Arab had been convicted on unsatisfactory evidence. But it was not of that I was thinking. Grunholtz I had never known, so it mattered nothing to me whether he was dead or alive. I was thinking of Malna. She had lied to me when I had thought her most truthful. She had told me something very near the truth about her fathers' association with Algiers, but she had said the doctor had died.

I could not even hear properly. When Charton said something to me, it did not penetrate my mind. I suppose he must have said that he was going, for when at last I looked about me,

he and Gougaloff had disappeared. I followed them. I could think of only one thing now. I must see Malna. I decided to take a risk and telephone.

She answered the call herself, and I thanked my luck.

"Listen," I said. "I did not know you were coming back to-day or I would have left to-night free. But I've got rid of those people and would like to see you. Where can you meet me?"

She seemed to hesitate. When she answered her voice was level.

"I'll be round at your rooms in an hour."

With that she rang off, and I was left with a whole hour in which to torture myself. Now she was coming I regretted having invited her. My head was in a whirl.

She was perfectly calm when she came into my room.

"I think I know why you want to see me," she said. "If I am right, it explains why I preferred to come here. I do not want any scenes in public."

"Scenes? Malna dear, I want to see you for yourself."

"Let us forget that for the time being. You have been hearing stories about me, I suppose."

"Stories? I . . ."

"Oh, don't try to be innocent! You would have been hearing stories about me in any case if you had dined with Gougaloff. But I'm not interested in him. I think I can deal with him."

"I don't follow."

"Never mind. Now then. You want to tell me that that Englishman recognized me in Algiers—that he found me in the street and I took him to see the corpse of a murdered man. Is that it?"

I nodded dumbly. She always seemed to read my thoughts.

"Exactly as I thought. Did he tell you he suspected me of murder?"

"No. And by God if he had, I'd have killed him."

"Would you? I wonder. He told you the man was a doctor, so you and he and Gougaloff put two and two together and decided that it must have been father's colleague and that father

murdered him to get the formula. Don't deny it. I hate lies like that. There's no courage in them. They are weak. You recalled the story of that horrible man Jacques Rouge and it all fitted together nicely. Of course, the Englishman recognized me at once. If he hadn't started I should never have recognized him. Oh yes, I pretended not to notice, but I did. But . . . but . . ." She hesitated, and the childlike expression appeared—the expression that always thawed me. "I couldn't keep it up. I wanted to run. So I froze my face in a smile, as I used to when I was in the chorus."

"You in the chorus?" That seemed to me far more important than anything else. It was a glimpse of her life of which I knew nothing.

She nodded. "When we first came to France we had no money, and we needed a lot to get father started. So I took a job on the stage. I hated it. But it didn't last long. Father found a backer, and I was set free."

"Darling, you must have suffered."

"You can't imagine what it was like," she said, taking a step towards me, so that my heart leapt. What did all this matter, so long as she loved me? My heart sang. I was free at last in my love. Whatever happened, whatever might happen, was as nothing compared with the fact that I loved Malna. She might have murdered that old fool Grunholtz, but even if her hands had still been wet with his blood, I should have kissed them.

But she stopped herself and grew distant again.

"Well, what do you want to know about it?" she asked.

"Nothing," I cried; "nothing. I don't care a fig. I want you, Malna, and the past doesn't matter. Let's forget it all. Let's run away together. I'm tired of all this. It has always been suspicions and doubts. It always will be here, in Paris. But elsewhere . . ."

She shook her head. I could see the tears glistening on her lashes and I longed to kiss them away.

"Can you escape from your past, George? Can you run away from your thoughts? It's not as easy as all that. I wish it were." She sighed.

"But I love you, Malna."

"Oh, George, I believe that—believe it at last. But it may be too late."

"Too late? But why . . . ?"

"Don't ask me, dear. I can't tell you. You'll find out for yourself perhaps. Listen while I tell you something. I went to that house to find father. I called and there was no reply. I went into the room where Dr. Grunholtz always worked and—and there he was, dead, with blood everywhere. I screamed, and one of the servants came. Together we went into the street and met this Englishman, who called himself a doctor. The boy went for the police. That is all I know."

"You believe that Arab killed him?"

She shook her head miserably. "I do not know. I wish things were clearer to me. I knew Grunholtz and father were always rowing, and I feared father's temper. I found father had gone—there was a note saying he would write from France. I joined him three weeks later."

"Did he say nothing to you?"

"Must you torment me? No, he said nothing, except that it was sad about Dr. Grunholtz, but luckily the work would go on. He had the formula and would develop it."

"I see."

"Over and over again I have asked myself what happened on that terrible day. Stories spread, and many people suspected father of having killed Grunholtz to get the formula. I could not believe them, yet always at the back of my mind is that tormenting doubt, and you can imagine that my interviews with the police were sheer torture for me."

"Poor darling!" I made to take her in my arms, but she repulsed me.

"Don't pity me, George! You know how I hate pity. We only pity what we despise, and I don't want to be despised by anyone. A minute ago I believed you loved me, but now I am all doubts again. You could not pity me if you did love me. Your love might turn to hate, but never to pity."

I did not know how to reply. She picked up her bag from the small table on which she had placed it.

"Find out the truth, George—the truth. Tell me. I want to know. I must know. But be careful."

She ran from the room, evading my arms, which tried to restrain her.

My thoughts were too scaring to be endured. I had seen a new Malna, a Malna who doubted herself; and though at first it had seemed nearer the truth, I saw that that was only self-deception. Perhaps there was no essential Malna, but only a procession of moods, each the truth in its way, the truth of the passing minute. Perhaps truth itself was only the actualities of the passing minute. . . . I was in danger of slipping into metaphysical subtleties that would prove anything.

"Find out the truth," she had said. Yes, I would do that. "But be careful." Why? Of what? She had not said, but I could guess. The shadow of Vardarma was even more across her path than mine. Neither of us could catch a glimpse of the sunshine till it was removed. Was truth alone powerful enough to dissolve it away?

Chapter 28

THE ANTI-TOXIN

THE NIGHT had passed somehow, and I was feeling tired and cross when I arrived at Vardarma's. The place seemed unnaturally quiet, and I settled down to work with an uneasy feeling that this quiet was the hush of the orchestra before the baton of Fate called for the opening chord. And I was not far wrong.

I had been at work for about an hour when the door opened softly and Gougloff crept in. He looked about him fearfully with glittering eyes.

"Have you seen him?" he whispered.

I shook my head. He could be referring to no one but Vardarma.

"He's not in the study?"

"He may be. I don't know."

He nodded slightly and retreated towards the door. I did not like the look of him at all. I knew Gougaloff's expression pretty well by now, but this one was unfamiliar to me. His eyes had the glitter of fever, yet he was certainly not feverish. Perhaps his strange tormented mind was giving way at last. I decided to follow him. If he found Vardarma, there might be trouble.

The door of the study was ajar, and I peeped round it. I had my excuse ready if Vardarma should be there; did he want any more anti-toxin prepared? But there was only Gougaloff. He was in the same attitude as I had seen him in before, with his eyes glued to the little black notebook and his lips moving as though in secret prayer.

I ran swiftly to his side. "You fool!" I hissed. "You didn't even shut the door."

"It's nothing," he said. "I am safe. I know it—every symbol. When I close my eyes I can see it in letters of fire. I have won, Borodin, won . . ."

He was in some sort of ecstasy from which I thought it wise to rouse him. Seizing him roughly by the shoulder, I swung him away from the desk. The notebook fell to the floor. At that moment Vardarma walked in. As we leapt aside, he raked us with his eyes.

"You take your own time, M. Gougaloff," he said silkily. "Last time I went to the clinic to find you, I discovered you in the laboratory. This time, it is in my study. I think I shall be justified in dismissing you. My patience has limits, and my experiment in trying to tolerate a fool gladly must be admitted to be a failure."

I looked at Gougaloff, expecting him to be cringing as usual. He was not. He was smiling serenely. Now Vardarma had no influence over him. He turned away.

Vardarma shrugged and made towards his chair behind the desk. His foot caught against something and he stumbled a little. He looked down and saw the dropped notebook. His face went a dreadful ashen colour. His eyes seemed lost between the drawn-down brows and the drawn-up cheeks, and his teeth showed for all the world like a wild animal's.

"One of you has been prying," he roared. "Robbing my desk, thrusting his dirty little fingers into my private papers. Which of you is it?" He swung from me to Gougaloff, and back again. "I can't trust anyone. You thieves sneak in the moment my back is turned. Which of you is it, I say? Own up."

Gougaloff continued to smile serenely, so I replied: "I came in expecting to find you. I wanted your instructions about the day's work as I have finished the last batch of anti-toxin."

He nodded, but it was plain he did not accept my explanation.

"I sec. May I see what you have in your hand?" He snatched the piece of paper I was holding and glared at it. It was nothing important. I had come prepared with an excuse, and this was part of it; a statement of the amount of anti-toxin I had prepared. He crumpled it in his fist and threw it with violence at Gougaloff.

"Take that simpering smirk off your face, you louse, and tell me what you're here for. What's your business? Isn't your place in the clinic? What have you been shoving your filthy snout into? And how did this book . . ." he stooped and picked up the notebook, which he banged on Gougaloff's head—"get on the floor?"

The lips writhed up as Vardarma spoke, completing the transformation into the wild beast. He did not remind me of a tiger or even a wolf, but, with his minute eyes, of a wild boar about to charge. He was actually snarling now and grinding his teeth. And, most sinister of all, was the alliance of a very fine expression of scorn with this purely animal face.

"Listen, rat," he went on. "I could crush that empty skull of yours with one hand. You can't be clever twice in this place. Now then, who's been at my notebook?"

Still standing over Gougaloff, he glared malevolently at me, but, plucking up my courage, I stared back. I had not looked inside the book and had only Gougaloff's word for what it contained. My innocence to that extent fortified me and gave me strength to endure that conflict of wills, which expressed itself through our warring eyes.

Vardarma turned away; apparently he was satisfied this time. He rounded on Gougaloff and seized the lapels of the white laboratory coat he was wearing.

"I might have known," he yelled. "It was you, Gougoloff—you, my prying little sneak scientist. I can see through you. Ever since you have been here you have tried to rob me—first of my daughter, then of my reputation, now of my formula. You've been itching to lay your dirty little paws on that for a long time, I know. You've tried to bring Borodin into your plots, but he's been too sensible."

He looked at me curiously. I could see that he was in doubt of my position in this affair and did not know whether to include me in his fury or win me to his support against Gougoloff. I might, he thought, give him valuable information. But I held my tongue. My time would come, whatever I did now.

Deciding I was quite a minor character, who could wait, he dragged Gougoloff to the desk.

"It's a funny little book, isn't it?" he sneered. "It holds all my secrets, and you know all about them. I'm a fake, aren't I, Gougoloff, pretending to knowledge I don't possess, killing people and saying I cure them? Isn't that what you say, my fine fellow? But not the pure Gougoloff—oh, no! He wants to save mankind. He knows that Vardarma's cure is nearly a cure, but not quite, and he knows that it wants improving and that he, the great Gougoloff, can do it. So he sets about his work. He challenges Vardarma."

I knew now that the real rage was coming. Vardarma was outside himself, talking of himself in the third person.

"First he tries to seduce Vardarma's daughter—but Malna wouldn't have anything to do with a stinking little hack chemist, would she? But he pestered day in, day out. He tried to make a sneak-thief blackmail me"—how Grenant would have loved to hear that description of himself—"so that eventually he could demand my secret. Then he tries to strike at my reputation by killing one of my patients. Vardarma met all these threats by crushing them. So this crawling, vermin-ridden toad descends to plain stealing, rifling my desk. Well, what did you find, my boastful little scientific Napoleon, my half-witted Newton, my purblind Lavoisier? Tell me. I am all ears for news of the great discovery."

Gougoloff's smile suddenly faded. I could see him beginning

to gasp for breath, for Vardarma's grip had closed tighter and tighter as the tirade had proceeded. I began to edge closer, fearing the physical violence that was to come. But Vardarma struck more quickly than I had thought. He tossed Gougaloff on to the desk and began to belabour the prostrate body with his huge fists.

Stung to fury, I seized Vardarma by the shoulders and tried to swing the giant away. I might as well have tried to shift the Eiffel Tower with my bare hands. Vardarma gave one hunch of the great shoulders and I was staggering back, thrown off my balance.

"Yes, you know all about Vardarma, don't you?" He punctuated the words with blows. "You think so. But there is one thing you don't know. Vardarma killed a man and was never caught. Vardarma is going to do that again. No, that's wrong. This time he is going to crush a worm, a wriggling earthworm."

I had recovered now and hurled myself on Vardarma. I am not a weakling by any means, but my efforts were quite unavailing. Rage had given Vardarma something more than even his normally great strength. I was powerless, and all I could do was to try to interpose my body so as to shield Gougaloff from some of the blows. I winced all the time. Vardarma was not only strong; he knew how to hit straight and powerfully.

But it could not last long. He stopped belabouring Gougaloff and stood back. Gougaloff lay still on the desk. His eyes opened weakly and blood trickled out of his mouth, staining the blotting-pad. Vardarma had certainly hit him scientifically—across the lungs.

"You've no right to do that!" I shouted. "No right at all. And as for being an accomplice, I didn't know anything about your being a fake and a murderer until you confessed it just now. You may batter Gougaloff, but you can't batter the whole police force. I'm going now I know . . ."

He did not reply to me directly. "Knowledge is a dangerous thing, a very dangerous thing, as our dear Gougaloff is going to discover. You'll remain where you are, m'sieur, and see what happens. Perhaps you will add to your knowledge a little.

And I am going to call Malna. She must see his degradation."

He picked up the house telephone, which I tried to snatch from him. "It is your own degradation she will see," I shrieked. "Do you think it is a sight for a girl to see a man laying across a desk, battered almost to a pulp, and her father with the blood on his hands?"

He threw me off. "Vardarma's daughter is Vardarma's daughter," he said, and my heart sank. Suppose it were true in the sense he implied?

As he laid down the telephone after calling Malna, he glared at me. "You can mind your own business," he snapped. "Do as you damn well please. You're sacked."

"Thank you," I replied. "I may be just someone to bully, Vardarma, but the arm of the law is long. Gougaloff has enough proof to hang you."

"We shall see. A witness has to speak in court before he can be believed. Perhaps our charming M. Gougaloff will not do so after all."

He looked away from me as the door opened and Malna entered. I watched her closely. Was Vardarma's daughter Vardarma's daughter? She avoided looking at her father and turned her eyes to the desk. She paled, and a disgusted look grew across her features.

"Take me away," she said quietly to me. "He is in one of his dreadful moods. He has them sometimes. What did Gougaloff do?"

"Your father is furious because he thinks Gougaloff has discovered the formula in his secret notebook," I replied.

She looked quickly at her father, and their eyes met.

"It's nothing to do with you," she said quickly to me. "You didn't look inside the book, did you?"

"No."

Vardarma turned away. Malna nodded to me and indicated Gougaloff.

"Do what you can and take him away. I'll wait for you downstairs in a taxi—I'll keep it a little way down the road."

Gougaloff was not as damaged as I had expected. He revived

quickly under simple treatment and he was soon in a frame of mind to talk.

"I'd take it all over again for what I've got," he said triumphantly. "I shammed most of the groans, though I must say he knows how to hit, and his fists are pretty heavy. Thanks for standing up for me."

"Oh, that's nothing. I admire your pluck. I wouldn't care to go through that for anything. I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

"You did more than I had any right to expect."

"Can you still remember the formula?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can." He closed his eyes and smiled slowly.

"Yes. It's there. I can see exactly how to work it. Really, it's much simpler than what you and I have been doing in the lab. Of course, it would have to be, or he would never have been able to do it."

"Hadn't you better write it down? You never know. You've taken a pretty good beating, and memory plays funny tricks even when you're normal."

"No." He shook his head. "Not yet."

"You still don't trust me?" I was intentionally resentful. I had done my level best for him and I had lost my job on his behalf. And still he looked on me with suspicion.

"No, it's not that. Don't run away with ideas. It's safer if only I know it—safer for everyone, especially you."

"What do you mean?"

"If you don't know it, he won't try to destroy you."

"I'm not afraid."

"Perhaps not. But it's better kept to myself. There were several there, you know, and it might not be the right one. I tell you what you can do. Make sure he kept the formula in that book. Ask Malna. I'm sure she knows. Then when you've verified it, let me know. I'll prove it in the lab.—my own lab.—and we'll copy it out and send round to various people."

The idea seemed sound to me. There was a chance of a mistake, though I doubted it. If it was Grunholtz's book, it could hardly be anything else. I supported Gougoloff downstairs and put him in a taxi. Then I went off to find Malna.

She was sitting in a taxi looking impatiently about her. As I came up, she pushed open the door, which was unlatched, and told me to get in at once. "He knows where to go," she said, "I've told him your rooms. I want to talk to you."

We did not speak during the journey. I still had that dreadful picture of Vardarma in my mind, and the fact of being with his daughter seemed unreal. But she had, at any rate, proved herself not to be his daughter in spirit, whatever her flesh might be.

As soon as we were in my rooms she looked at me, but I forestalled her.

"Malna," I said, "I'm going to tell you the truth. Gougloff has the formula. He wants to develop it so that it becomes a real cure. I don't think he's to blame. Your father has admitted that he's a charlatan and stole the formula. But he wants you to confirm that it was in the black notebook that your father kept it. Was it?"

She nodded. "Yes. Now I want to ask you a question. It's important."

"Yes?"

"Do *you* know the formula? Has Gougloff told you or made you write it down for him?"

"No. Not yet. But he's going to."

"Ah! Thank God!"

"Why do you say that so fervently?"

"For no reason and every reason. I'm glad, that's all. It proves what I thought. Your Gougloff is only another rascal. He'll do what my father did—run away somewhere and start to make money out of it."

I caught my breath. "Then you knew all the time?" I asked, shakily. "You knew your father was cheating and pretending to cure people when all the time he was just relieving them for a week or two?"

"Yes—and no." She sighed. "I mean, I knew he had a cure, but I wasn't sure it was a fraud, I found that out from Gougloff. He used it when he tried to blackmail me."

"Blackmail you?" I gasped. "I can't believe it."

"It's true. You may think he's a disinterested scientist, but I

can assure you—indeed, I'm certain of it—that he hasn't got hold of that formula just for the sake of humanity. It's primarily for the use of Gougaloff against me."

"But I can't understand this. What can he do to you, and how does the formula come into it?"

"He wants to marry me—he always has. He's been looking all the time for a weapon to use to force me into it. He thought he had it when he discovered the cure was a fake. He knows all about blackmail—remember how he put Grenant up to it. Now he'll try to use the formula in the same way. He'll threaten to publish it and prove it doesn't work, and that'll ruin father completely. He knows I depend on father. Can't you see? He's not such a disinterested scientist after all, is he?"

The doubts I had thought had gone for good and all returned. I did not know what to believe. I could hardly imagine that Gougaloff had deliberately risked his life and had taken all that cruel punishment merely to force an unwilling and hating girl into marriage with him.

"Gougaloff is mad," Malna said suddenly, as though she had divined my thoughts. "Everyone who loves me either goes mad or dies."

I laughed out loud till tears started in my eyes. This was an excellent relief from doubt and over-seriousness. It was melodrama, anti-climax, pathos.

"Death comes to all men," I returned; "and most of us are a little mad. Are you trying to scare me?"

She was not affronted by my laughter. She remained perfectly cool and serious.

"No," she said. "I am warning you. I would have told you before, but I was afraid you might laugh."

"And I am laughing. You might have let me enjoy the joke earlier."

"It doesn't matter. You wait and see. When men love me, they will do anything for me—anything. Father loved me—as a father—but I drove him to kill that doctor in Algiers. Of course I knew about that. I don't say I told him to murder him. I kept asking for money and clothes and an easy life, and in desperation he killed the old man and stole the formula. He

bought me furs and silks at the cost of people's lives. Men must lavish things on me, or I lose interest in them. Gougloff . . ."—she shrugged—"Gougloff had nothing to give."

"And I? What about me?"

"You have been wise, George. You have not loved me—not the real me. You have taken, but you have not given. You have always thought of me as something different from what I am—as 'a sweet, simple girl'."

I smiled a little crookedly. "So we come back to mockery and cheap cynicism, with a touch of melodrama and the films thrown in. I never imagined you could remain the sweet, simple girl for long."

"You are right. I liked deceiving you. You liked it too—admit it. You knew you were being deceived. You never loved me, did you, George? Tell me the truth."

I was deeply moved. I cannot say why. Perhaps it was the sudden startling return to sincerity. I do not know. And before I could reply she was her real self again—the self I did not want to recognize, though it was the self I knew best.

"Exactly," she said; and I am sure she deliberately misinterpreted my silence. "Just as I thought. You are clever. You see through me. You understand at once. At the *Rien a Faire* I tried so hard to throw dust in your eyes. That's why I came back to you that night. I had no other reason. You must forget me, forget me completely."

As I still did not answer, she smiled. It was a brittle smile. If in truth I can see through her, then, I thought, she is a window that looks out on fog. Nothing is plain. But she was speaking again.

"It won't hurt you at all to forget," she went on. "I don't want it to hurt you. You are naturally hard in your heart, and this will mean nothing to you. 'Malna,' you can say to yourself, 'the poisoned orchid, the rotten flower, the sickly sweet perfume of corruption.' And you can be glad you escaped me, George; I want you to be very, very glad. Now—good-bye."

I paid but little attention to her words, though they all came back to me later. My eyes were reading her face, not my ears her words. There was a struggle going on in her. I knew she

was lying, lying clumsily and melodramatically, using phrases out of a romantic novel. Yet she was clever, too; she gave me no opening to thrust at her. She knew I realized she was lying, but she denied me an opportunity to break through the façade of tricks and draw near to her by a word, a touch, a chord of shared experience. She was burning her bridges behind her and enjoying her self-immolation.

"If you cannot laugh over me now," she said, "you will laugh some day. But . . ."—her voice changed subtly—"do say it hurts a little—say that saying good-bye gives you some pain. It will make me happy."

I drew a deep breath. "Malna," I said evenly, "you are a liar. You love me. Why all this second-rate acting? What are you trying to run away from?"

"From myself. I cannot love you. I have sold the love I had for you. It is gone."

"For what?"

"A price. I can't tell you."

"Never?"

"One day, perhaps, you'll know. Not now, but soon, you'll know everything. Now leave me, please, to myself. Send me away and don't talk of love any more. It's not mine to talk about when I've sold it. Only believe this, I shall never, never love anyone as I have loved you. Does that make you happy?"

"No. It is no consolation for what I cannot understand. You are merely trying to make the pain of parting more exquisite. It's an old trick. You are trying to make our love more than it is."

"You are hard; I was right. But it is better that you should be like that—better for both of us. Now kiss me good-bye and then let me go and find a taxi—alone."

"You are going away?"

"Yes."

"Soon?"

"To-morrow."

Her lips were cold when I kissed her. She did not open her eyes when I released her.

"Good-bye," she said simply.

I was about to turn away when she gripped my arm fiercely. "One more kiss," she said. "Then I can go."

I kissed again. It was not real. I was outside the Present and living in the Future, hunting with blind eyes for a path that might lead to her. I thought I saw such a road; and its reality was greater than this unsubstantial, tormenting mockery of the Present.

It was not for a moment or two that I noticed I was alone in my room, with the faint scent of mimosa to remind me of the departed minutes.

Chapter 29

A CONFESSION

I TRIED to force myself to be normal and to attend to the affairs of the moment. Bringing out my writing-case, I sat down and wrote a note to Gougaloff to tell him of Malna's confirmation of the formula in the notebook. I cannot say why I did this; it seemed utterly futile; and I hardly knew what to make of the position. No one seemed prepared to be honest in this business; each was for ever casting doubts and suspicions on the other. Even Malna was not above that sort of thing. I cursed the day on which I had yielded to Grenant's entreaties and gone to see his famous discoverer.

Grenant had quite disappeared; I had not seen him for a long time. I did not particularly want to, yet I had an affection for him. In spite of the mess he had got me into, he was still a symbol of an earlier and better pattern of life—a life in which much revolved round an appointment with a pretty girl or the discovery of a startling discovery. And I suddenly realized that I had been side-tracked. I had attended no lectures since I had been with Vardarma. I had lost valuable time and had gained nothing in return. If the police should suddenly take a hand in the business and bring Vardarma to justice, my position would be unenviable. As an assistant to the notorious Dr. Vardarma, I should not have very rosy prospects of making a good start to my career.

I sealed the note and resolved to take it round to Gougaloff's rooms. The concierge shook his head when I inquired for Gougaloff; he had been in and gone out, and had hinted that he might not return that night. So I handed over the letter and began to roam the streets aimlessly. The evil fates that had taken charge of my destiny led me to a *bistro* where almost the first person I saw was Grenant. He smiled at me from afar and signed to me to come and sit by him. Reluctantly I did so; I could see, by the look in his eyes, that he was in one of his self-important moods. Perhaps he had a new startling discovery to announce. Well, it might pass the time.

"Come and sit down," he said warmly, and a little airily. "I'll order you a drink."

"It's a long time since I've seen you, Grenouille," I said, merely for something to say.

"I've been busy," he returned. "Come and have dinner with me and I'll tell you. I'm on to something big at last."

"Oh!"

I drank my *apéritif* gloomily. Grenant was intolerable. He was not saying much, but he was puffing himself out and trying to impress me with his importance. Once or twice he pulled out a notebook and consulted it with a portentous frown on his face. This was a new Grenant. He was no longer the discoverer of discoverers, but a would-be business man.

He took me to an expensive small restaurant and chose a secluded table. It was hardly a happy prelude to the evening that he tried to show his importance by snapping at the waiters and finding fault with everything. He found a speck on the table-cloth and had it removed. He complained that the menu was illegible and had a fresh copy brought. After a few more exhibitions of this kind, I felt I had had enough.

"What's come over you, Grenouille?" I demanded. "Has someone left you a fortune or have you got a job as a share-pusher?"

He smiled magnanimously. "I'm engaged on highly important work," he replied. "It's very confidential, but I think I can rely on you. You had a hand in it, so it's only fair you should know. As a matter of fact, when things have developed

a bit more I think I may be able to do you a spot of good."

I resented his patronizing air. "Why not come down to earth and tell me? And if you grumble at that waiter again, I shall walk out."

"Oh, that's all right. You have to let these people know who you are; they don't respect you otherwise. You've heard about Gougaloff, I suppose?"

"The last I saw of Gougaloff, which was this afternoon, was a man who had been battered nearly to death by Vardarma."

"Exactly. But that's not the point. Gougaloff has the formula. Now he's been to see me and put me in charge of the business arrangements. We've worked out a plan between us."

"That's very interesting." A plan hatched by those two, with Grenouille in charge of the business end, was likely to be either farcical or dangerous. I waited, knowing that Grenant would tell me everything.

"My first job is to get hold of Vardarma and talk to him. I may say that Gougaloff is being a little difficult. He's bought a revolver and is threatening to shoot Vardarma unless he comes to terms. I propose to tackle it on more businesslike lines. After all, Vardarma has had a good run, and it's our turn now."

Oh, I thought, so Malna was right. Gougaloff has cleared Vardarma out of the racket so that he can start it for himself.

"What are you proposing to do?"

"I can't tell you exactly," replied Grenant mysteriously. "Gougaloff is very unbusinesslike. It's a good thing he's got a friend like me at his elbow. His demands are quite unpractical. He wants to force Vardarma's hand for silly things."

"Marriage to Malna, for instance?"

Grenant looked at me as if I were mad. "Good heavens, no! He says he'll shoot Malna if he gets the chance. No, his idea is to demand money from Vardarma for research. He says Vardarma got all that money under false pretences, and it's right that he should give it up so that it can be devoted to the purpose for which it was subscribed. Nothing else interests the fellow. I think he's a bit touched."

I could see now that Malna had been lying to me. He did want the formula for itself after all.

"I suppose you have a better plan?"

"Of course. I've gone into the whole thing carefully and thought it out from every angle. It needs businesslike handling."

This was good, very good. It was only a few hours since Gougloff had secured the formula; it was even fewer hours since he could have met Grenant; yet here was this bumptious fellow all ready with an elaborately thought-out plan.

"Like the blackmail, for example?" I asked sarcastically.

"I admit that was an error of judgment," returned Grenant, quite unruffled. "It gave me useful experience of Vardarma, however. Now I quite agree with Gougloff that there must be research. But that's not enough. I agree, too, that it's right and proper that Vardarma should finance this thing to begin with. I think we can force him to. He's helpless without the formula—depend upon that."

"He might have a copy."

"I don't think so. However, that's not important," he went on hurriedly. I was beginning to grow interested in spite of myself. Grenant as a far-seeing business man was a novel experience. "I propose to get as much out of Vardarma as I can—at least a million francs as a first instalment. With that, Gougloff will take over the laboratory and the clinic, but we'll close the clinic until we've got improved results. As soon as it looks as though we're on the right road, we shall form a syndicate and put the stuff on the market under a registered name. We shall patent anything we can patent. That's the way, my boy—keep it in our own hands as much as we can."

"I see. And you think Vardarma will agree?"

"He'll have no option. You see, he won't be entirely the loser. Gougloff wanted to get the money out of him and then turn him over to the police, but I don't agree. After all, we've got to be fair. Vardarma worked this thing up from the publicity point of view. His name has a certain value. He's got the choice between being denounced as a fraud or coming in with us on a business footing."

"It sounds like a business footing if Gougloff is going to shoot him at sight."

"These personal animosities are always trying in business,

but they can be surmounted," said Grenant with a Napoleonic air. "I don't propose to let Vardarma in on the actual running of the scheme. We just want the use of his name. In return for that, we'll give him a fair rate of interest on the money he puts up, and he can have a nominal seat on the board of the syndicate."

"I see. That's generous of you." I pretended to be crafty. "But where do I come in?"

"I'll look after you, never fear. I think Gougloff would like you to be in charge of the clinical side of the research. Of course, you'll have to take your degree first. We shall insist on that. In the meantime, we shall take you over with the establishment as a going concern and continue to pay you your salary."

"That's good enough," I said, feigning satisfaction. "Of course, you'll keep it at the figure Vardarma has raised it to?"

"We shall pay you your two thousand a month," replied Grenant, with a take-it-or-leave-it manner.

"Vardarma has put it up to four thousand."

"We shall have to discuss that. In the meantime, you will get two thousand until the syndicate is formed."

"I see. I must say you're acting very handsomely. How are you going to set to work and when are we going to begin?"

"I shall see Vardarma to-morrow and put our terms to him. If he agrees, as he's bound to, in view of the alternative, we shall get a notary to draw up an agreement."

"It sounds very good to me, but frankly I can't see Vardarma giving up his money and his prestige quite so easily."

"He's bound to," repeated Grenant. "If he refuses, then Gougloff will go to the police and confess everything. He won't get punished if he tells them all. You'll be all right, because you were an innocent victim."

"Our old friend blackmail," I commented sharply. "So you really think Vardarma will take it lying down, part with all his cash, and come into your fake syndicate as a guinea-pig. By the way, what is he going to get out of it?"

"A small honorarium for the use of his name—and his liberty."

"I see. Well, I wish you good luck, but frankly I can't see it happening."

"Borodin," he said with great seriousness, "you're always a pessimist. You don't weigh up a situation before you express an opinion, but naturally take a gloomy view. You think it out. We hold all the trumps. Vardarma can't win a trick."

"If I know anything of Vardarma, he's probably got a couple of aces up his sleeve."

"Well, we'll see. You'll be sorry if you don't come in. You wait till I've finished with him. Really, he hasn't a leg to stand on. Matter of fact, Borodin, I can understand your scepticism. You're not making much out of it. But between you and me, that's only a beginning. We've got to be cautious at the start until we see how we stand. If the research goes well, and you handle the clinical side all right, why, I give you my word, we'll put you on the board and you'll be a millionaire in no time."

"Thank you again. I'll take your advice and think it all over. Let me know when you've got it all fixed, and I'll give you my decision."

"Very well. But you can't expect us to be so generous if you wait till you see it's all safe and sound. We're taking the risk, and the people who take the risk ought to reap the biggest reward."

"I understood there was no risk."

"No real risk," he said quickly. "But naturally there's risk in every business venture. I know." He nodded sagely. "There it is, though, and you can do what you like. Only keep it quiet. We don't want it talked about. There are some people who'd be only too glad to hear about it."

"Such as the police," I rejoined, rising from the table.

He shrugged with what I suppose he imagined was a dignified air and rose also.

"I'll let you know how things develop," he said.

Outside he called a taxi. Obviously he was living on the profits of the syndicate in anticipation, for I heard him give the address of an expensive night-club.

Chapter 30

A NEW PLOT

GRENANT'S GRANDIOSE scheme did not really interest me, but it had served its purpose in taking me out of myself for a little while. I wished I could discover how much of it was Gougloff's idea and how much Grenant's, though I suspected that the latter was the prime mover. It had all the earmarks of Grenant's mind. Difficulties were ignored and the wished-for result was taken as certain. The only practical issue for me was that I must take scrupulous care to avoid becoming involved in these fantastic plans. Grenant was quite capable of swearing that I was in with him if, finding things were going wrong, he saw a way of escape by this means.

Curiously enough I had a good night's rest, and I rose at my usual time. Though Vardarma had dismissed me, I resolved to go to the laboratory as though nothing had happened. It was my one chance of seeing Malna again and of trying to get her back. Yet even Malna had taken on a nightmarish quality of the unreal now. All these people were to some extent phantasms. I began to wonder about my sanity, whether I had lost the power of distinguishing reality from hallucination.

When I settled down at the laboratory bench, I wondered what might happen. I had ascertained by careful listening that Vardarma was in his study; his heavy breathing was quite unmistakable. If he should demand an explanation of my presence, I proposed to tell him that he had either to give me a month's salary or let me work out my time. I felt I was on sure ground there. Though I did not agree with Grenant on Vardarma's fear of the police, I did not think he wanted to invite attention to himself in the courts.

As there was nothing special to do, I busied myself with tidying up the laboratory and making a stocktaking of the reagents. All was quiet until eleven o'clock, when I heard the door open softly. I was shielded by a cupboard and the visitor could not see me, but I could see him through the crack of the hinge.

It was Grenant. He was dressed as I had never seen him dressed before. He was wearing an old-fashioned frock-coat with silk facings, and he carried a silk hat in his hand. His coat was undone and displayed a heavy gold watch-chain across his spreading belly. There was, too, a gold pin in his stock of black silk. I gasped to myself. Then I remembered that, of course, he was a company promoter now, and this no doubt was his idea of the proper dress. I could not help smiling to myself; there was something incongruous about that puffy face rising above the dazzling white collar.

Even more surprising, however, was his obvious embarrassment. He kept fidgeting, and it was plain he was supremely nervous. When he took out a cigarette and lit it, his hand trembled.

"Grenouille," I said, stepping out from my cover.

He started and almost dropped his cigarette, but he recovered quickly when he saw who had spoken.

"Oh, it's you," he said, grinning with relief. "I thought I'd just have a smoke before I went in to see Vardarma. I suppose he's in?" he asked anxiously.

"In the study," I replied.

His face fell. News that Vardarma had disappeared would, I felt sure, have been very welcome to Grenant just then. But he quickly assumed his air of bumptious self-confidence.

"I'm going to discuss business with him," he remarked, tapping a dispatch-case I had not noticed before. "I've drawn out a draft agreement, and I expect he'll initial it at once so that we can start immediately to have a proper one drawn up."

"You're looking very magnificent," I remarked, not at all eager to hear anything more of his plans.

"One has to be careful of oneself," he said, unable to hide a sheepish smile. "Appearances count for a great deal. As a matter of fact, I don't mind telling you, as an old friend, that I've hired this rig-out. It suits me well, I think. As soon as we've fixed up the finance I shall get one for myself."

"Have a good time last night at the Chien Courbe?" I asked, naming the night-club I had heard him mention to the taxi-driver.

"Changed my mind, old man," he said. "I went straight

home instead. Doesn't do to have a late night before an important interview."

I smiled slightly. I could imagine him frantically counting his change and telling the taxi man to drive him home.

He stubbed his cigarette in a watch-glass—just the sort of thing he would do.

"Well, I'll be getting along," he remarked. "I'll look in on the way out."

I watched him go, and as soon as I heard the study door close I tiptoed down the passage. I wanted to hear as much as I could of the interview.

I couldn't hear much to start with. Vardarma seemed to be keeping silent, for Grenant's voice droned on. Then there was a pause and the sound of heavy breathing. It was followed by a roar and a squeak. These noises were obviously the products of Vardarma and Grenant respectively. I longed to know what was happening, but so far there were no sounds of strife, so I thought it better to remain outside.

A moment later the door was flung open, and I just had time to flatten myself against the corridor wall. Grenant soared through the air, his coat tails streaming behind him like a comet's tail. He landed with a thud that shook the building. The door slammed to. It reopened a second or two later while Grenant was still sitting on the floor looking a trifle dazed. A silk hat shot past me and caught Grenant a remarkably accurate blow on the left ear.

It was as much as I could do to prevent myself from laughing out loud. The combination of the frock-coat and the undignified exit was too much for my sense of humour, and the appendix of the silk hat completed the picture of the ludicrous. However, I ran forward, pulled Grenant to his feet and dragged him into the laboratory.

"The interview was not highly successful, I gather," I said, as I brushed him down.

"He's not in a very tractable frame of mind," returned Grenant, "but he'll come round. He listened to all I had to say—I'll say that for him, and I think he saw the fix he was in. It's his temper. You can't argue with physical violence. It's a

confession of weakness. If he could have refuted me any other way, he would have done so. But he couldn't, so before I had time to take guard, he'd caught me in his arms and—well, he behaved in a very ungentlemanly way. That's not the way to do business," he added plaintively. "But never mind. As soon as he's had time to think about it clearly and quietly, he'll come round. I've left the draft agreement with him."

"You've left the draft agreement with him? What was in it?"

"A résumé of our terms. That we'd hold off if he agreed."

"You're a fine business man," I exclaimed. "Don't you see that sort of thing is illegal? It's blackmail—and you've put it in writing."

"Oh, he won't take action. I can deal with him."

I turned away in disgust. Grenant was almost imbecilic. I picked up the silk hat, very dented on the side on which it had impinged Grenant's ear.

"Is this part of the hired outfit?" I demanded.

He nodded. "I'm afraid it is," he replied.

"Then I imagine they'll charge you for it. How much have you got on you?"

He turned out his pockets. "Fifty francs," he replied.

I took out a note and handed it to him. "You'll need this, and if you want any more, let me know. And now get out. If Vardarma comes in and sees you, there'll be the devil to pay."

But Vardarma was already in the room. He was regarding us with a mocking smile.

"Very touching," he remarked. "But Borodin's right, my blackmailing frog. You had better go. Even I might hesitate before throwing you out of a second floor window, which is what I shall have to do if you're still here in two minutes' time."

Grenant picked up his battered hat and fled. Vardarma turned to me.

"And where do you come into this?" he asked.

"Nowhere," I replied. "Except that Grenant told me enough about it to make me keep well clear of it."

"You have a certain discretion," he commented, quite pleasantly. "But I'm not sure what you're doing here. I was

under the impression I had dispensed, with great regret, with your valuable services."

"You did not name a date," I returned. "I am entitled either to notice or salary in lieu of notice."

"At any rate, you're more of a business man than our friend Grenant le Grenouille. That was quite a refreshing interlude. A man who wears a frock-coat deserves to be thrown out. Is Gougaloff about?"

"Not so far as I know."

"A pity. I should like to see him. I like handling my own affairs, even though others might prefer the police. M. Grenant was good enough to inform me that Gougaloff proposes to shoot me. If he comes here with that intention, please show him in."

He rubbed his hands. I did not like that suave tone. I made up my mind that if Gougaloff was rash enough to come, I would use every effort to get rid of him, even at the cost of throwing him out.

Vardarma was eyeing me with a quizzical air.

"I rather fancy, Borodin, it was neither devotion to duty nor the desire for financial reward that brought you here this morning," he observed silkily. "You came here, I imagine, because you wanted to see a certain person."

I did not reply. He was boring me with his eyes as though reading my thoughts.

"You came, in fact, in the hope of exchanging greetings with my daughter. Your time has been wasted, my friend. Malna left Paris this morning by a very early train—and she is not coming back."

"Where has she gone?" I demanded hotly.

He shook his head. "I cannot tell you. I am not sure myself, and even if I knew I must observe her confidence. Her express wish was that no one was to be told—and especially you."

"I see."

And then he did a remarkable thing. He put his hand on my shoulder and smiled quite pleasantly.

"Don't fret, Borodin," he said. "I know Malna, and though

she is my daughter I will tell you that you are better off as it is. It is stupid to say to you 'Try to forget,' but at least I can say don't brood on it and trust to time."

With that he was gone. I could not understand this sudden touch of humanity. Never before had I even suspected that Vardarma, of all people, could offer sympathy or understanding to anyone. I shook my head. The variety of the human soul is unlimited.

Chapter 31

BLACKMAIL

I DID not have much time to think things out, however, for Vardarma had not been gone five minutes before Gougloff came in. I had suspected him of mental unbalance before, and now I could have no doubt of it. His whole expression was wild. His clothes were dishevelled and his eyes glittered unnaturally. He seemed gaunt, as though the flesh under his skin had been dissolved away. His voice was hard and edged; and he spoke to me in Russian, which he had never done before. I do not say that speaking in Russian is a sign of madness, but I knew that Gougloff for some reason had renounced his native tongue and had resented my attempts to use it. It was a sign of loss of control on his part to revert to it.

"Where's Vardarma?" he demanded.

"He's gone," I replied, ambiguously.

"That's a lie. I heard him in his study. Is he alone?"

"I know nothing about him. He's in a bad mood this morning. He threw Grenant out on his ear."

"I'm not afraid of him. I've taken one beating from him, and this time the whip is in the other hand. So Grenant was thrown out?"

"Yes."

"Serve him right—thrusting his nose into what didn't concern him."

"I thought you and he were in it together." I wanted to keep him with me as long as I could.

"I let him think I agreed. He's a fool. I don't care a damn about making money. I want to get even with Vardarma. Where's Malna?"

"Gone," I replied. For the first time I was glad she was out of the way. Grenant might have reported Gougloff's threats correctly.

"Oh, so she's run first. It doesn't matter."

"Hadn't you better give me the formula, as you promised?" I continued. "I can start making copies."

He laughed metallicly. He laughed for so long that I thought his reason had gone completely.

"I shall never write that formula down," he said at last, wiping his eyes. "I shall get hold of that notebook and burn it. It's tainted with death. No good can ever come of it. In good time, a great man will discover the secret and use it purely. You can't make gold out of pitch."

"You don't propose to go on with it?"

"I couldn't. My business is with Vardarma. Why are you keeping me here? I know. You're on his side. He's getting away while you hold me off. I see. You always were a double-dealing traitor."

He sprang towards the door too quickly for me to intercept him. I chased him down the passage and caught him by the shoulder just as he was stretching out his hand to the knob of the study door.

"You mustn't go in there," I said, as softly, yet as urgently as I could. "He'll kill you. He's sworn to."

"I'm not afraid. He can't kill me. He dare not. Let me go."

Half his words were French, half Russian. He was struggling madly, and he was shouting aloud.

And then the door was flung open, and Vardarma looked out.

"What the hell is going on here?" he roared. His eyes fell on Gougloff. "Oh, it's our little chemist, is it? Borodin, you're being most unkind. You know how anxious I am to meet him and how anxious he is to meet me. Come in, Gougloff. Let's have a look at you. Give a mere charlatan an opportunity to pay his respects to a real scientist."

He stood aside and bowed in mock politeness as Gougloff

marched into the room. Hardly knowing what I was doing I followed.

Vardarma retired behind his desk, but he did not sit down. He stood with his arms behind his back, staring at Gougaloff with an odd smile on his face. And Gougaloff stared back. For a minute or two they stood thus.

"Sit down, Gougaloff," said Vardarma at last. "I am sure you have important things to say. You had better stay, Borodin; a witness may be valuable. Now, Gougaloff, I am all ears."

"You're the devil himself," said Gougaloff thickly. "You're a murderer. The only punishment for murder is death."

"Ah! I'm not sure that French law takes quite the same view. You are going to charge me, Gougaloff?"

"No. I can't charge you. You murder souls, not bodies. You have murdered my soul. You have murdered Malna's soul. God knows whether you have yet murdered Borodin's soul. You have to feed your own black soul on other people's souls."

"That is all very interesting, Gougaloff—and very Russian. I myself am not quite so certain of the existence of the soul. But then, I am not a real scientist. What exactly are you driving at?"

A curious smile spread over Gougaloff's face. He drew a pace nearer Vardarma.

"You believe in nothing but yourself," he growled. He made a sudden movement. How it happened I do not know, but there he was with a revolver in his hand. It was pointing straight at Vardarma's breast at a range of not more than a couple of yards. If he had fired, Vardarma would have crumpled up.

I made a quick movement to interfere and then dropped back. Something warned me that it was not for me to take a hand in this curious drama. For Vardarma did not move a muscle. He stood there, his great form offering an unmissable target, with his hands behind his back, and a smile on his face.

It was like some horrible waxworks with the added horror of reality. Neither spoke; neither moved. I waited in anguish for the report, the lurching body. I was trying to decide where

my duty would lie—whether I should try to give help to Vardarma or prevent Gougaloff from escaping.

But the report did not come. The uncanny silence lengthened. They stood stock still.

And then I saw Vardarma's eyes. They were fixed on Gougaloff, but they were unfocused—or, rather, they looked as if they were focused on something very, very far away. They were alive with a glowing fire. I turned away. I could not face them.

Gougaloff's outstretched hand wavered. Slowly he thrust the pistol into his breast pocket and dropped his hands to his side.

Now Vardarma spoke, in a sing-song tone, almost caressingly.

"No, Gougaloff, you will not kill me, after all. I am not afraid of death, but I prefer to die in my own way and in my own time. Look at me, Gougaloff. Look at my eyes."

Gougaloff slowly raised his head and looked. Thus he remained, for what seemed to me an eternity, until Vardarma spoke again.

"Good-bye, Gougaloff," he said. "You know what to do. You will do it at eleven to-morrow morning. Good-bye. You may go now."

Gougaloff nodded and turned on his heel. He slouched out of the room. Suddenly Vardarma collapsed into his chair, and I hastened to his side.

Chapter 32 EXPERIMENT WITH HYPNOTISM

I COULD see what was the matter with Vardarma. He had made a supreme effort of will and hypnotized Gougaloff into submission; and in doing it he had exhausted himself. It was better to leave him alone. I did not know how long he might remain like this, and I decided to stay by his side.

Vardarma was strong. In ten minutes he opened his eyes and looked up at me.

"Ah, Borodin," he said. "What a pity about Gougaloff. He will do it, of course. He cannot fail. Still, I could not kill him myself. I have my reputation to think of."

"What will he do?"

"Yes, he was harder than I expected. It was touch and go. Twice he very nearly pulled the trigger. Fortunate for both of us he didn't, wasn't it?"

"What will he do?" I insisted.

"Who? Oh, Gougaloff. You wait and see."

"He will shoot himself?"

"Oh, no. But he will die. Let's forget him."

"I cannot. You have put him under hypnotic suggestion. How will he die?"

"He told you himself. Didn't he say that the only punishment for murder is death?"

"But not in France—you said so. And besides, he has done no murder."

"He designed to, Borodin. That makes him a murderer. And as for our lady guillotine, she does occasionally get a meal, when the murder has been sufficiently important."

I turned away, baffled and worried. Vardarma was beyond me. I was afraid of him now as I had never been before. His bodily strength was enormous, but it was as nothing to the power of his mind. With that he could dominate everyone. He had done it over and over again. Scientists had been fooled under their very noses. I myself had started off in scepticism and turned to enthusiasm. But I had been right in one thing: Vardarma was a great man. True, his greatness was evil, but that was his destiny. Who can say what makes genius turn sometimes to goodness, sometimes to evil?

Slowly I left the room. I knew I should never see it again. This part of my life was closed. I was glad of it in a numb sort of way. I felt utterly lethargic. Had he hypnotized me? What foolish things should I do in the next twenty-four hours? I shook my head, uncertain even of my own mind.

But the fresh air in the streets refreshed me, and I walked in the gardens till I felt more normal. Then everything came back to me. "At eleven o'clock to-morrow," Vardarma had

said. I had to find Gougaloff and keep him under control. It was my one chance of defeating Vardarma.

Naturally I went first to Gougaloff's rooms. The concierge shook his head and burst into a flood of recrimination. He had not seen M. Gougaloff since the night before. M. Gougaloff had undoubtedly gone for good, and he had left owing two weeks' rent. Someone had told the good concierge that he must never trust Russians; with the best will in the world they were untrustworthy, dilatory, unpunctual in their payments, altogether unreliable. . . . To check the torrent and save myself from listening to any further slanders on my countrymen, I inquired what was owing and paid Gougaloff's debts, with a *pourboire* in addition. The concierge changed at once. I told him who I was and added that I was Russian, and that we did not let our friends down. He was all repentance, and I left him vowing that he would, in future, act as the guardian of all Russians who might come his way.

This did not help me to find Gougaloff. I knew the places where he usually lunched; they were all restaurants of the cheaper type at which regular customers are known by name. A tour of these took me well over an hour, but it brought no result. Gougaloff had disappeared entirely.

All that afternoon I walked about not entirely aimlessly, for I kept to the districts to which I knew him to be addicted. Anyone who was even slightly acquainted with Gougaloff I stopped and interrogated. It was quite hopeless.

In despair I thought of going to the police and telling them that Gougaloff's mind had gone and that I feared he might do himself or someone else a mischief. But that was beyond me, at any rate for the moment. The police might drag the whole story from me, and that was to be avoided at all costs. So I continued my search, watching the buses, scanning the pavements, returning time and again to his favourite places of resort until their proprietors indicated that I was not altogether a welcome visitor. Yes, one of them said, all the world knew M. Gougaloff was mad; who could account for his goings and his comings?

By seven o'clock I was worn out and famished, for I had had

no food since early morning. My mind was in a ferment. If anyone had told me the story I would have pooh-poohed it; 'hypnotism,' I would have said, 'can't work like that.' But I had seen it work; and I was afraid. The uncertainty of what suggestion Vardarma had made to Gougaloff added to my sense of apprehension.

Wearily I turned into a *bistro* and ordered a drink. I had half consumed it when I felt a nudge at my elbow. It was Grenant—the old, familiar Grenant in his shiny coat and the look of perpetual wonder in his eyes. Obviously the professional student had replaced the business man.

"Can I join you?" he asked, though he sat down without waiting for permission. "I've been looking for Gougaloff. Have you seen him?"

"I have not," I replied. "To be precise, I have been searching all Paris for him since this morning. Finish your drink and we'll go somewhere quiet. Then I'll tell you all about it."

I did not so much as refer to the silk hat. Grenant was not my immediate game.

Over dinner, I told Grenant exactly what had happened. His eyes grew larger and rounder with every word, and his mouth opened till he was gaping. He drank it all in.

"I say," he said at last, "this is serious. I've been reading psychiatry lately and I can tell you there's a lot to learn about hypnotic suggestion. According to some authorities, you can't hypnotize a man to do something he doesn't really want to do, but . . ."

"I'm not interested in your authorities. I'm not interested in hypnotism in general. What I'm interested in is Gougaloff and what's going to happen to him. We've got to find him somehow and put him under restraint. I don't see how it's to be done unless we go to the police."

"But the police . . ."

"Yes, I know. They'll ask a lot of questions. Now listen: I decided this afternoon that nothing would induce me to go to the police, for that very reason. But I can see it's the only thing to do. Gougaloff has gone out of his mind—understand? That's all we're saying. Come on."

I could see he did not like it, but he followed me meekly and a little later I was talking to the official at the police office. He was very polite and very anxious to help, but he did not minimize the difficulties.

"You ask us, *en effet*, to pick out this mad one from the millions who are in Paris. And what can you tell us about him? He is Russian—yes. But so are you, m'sieur, so are many hundreds, perhaps thousands, in this city since the Revolution. You give us a description, I know. But what is a description like this. I could go out in the streets now and within half an hour bring you back a man answering to your description—but it would not be your M. Gougaloff. In the end, we shall catch him, but it will take time. We will do our best, m'sieur, but you cannot expect miracles. You yourself say you have searched all day for him and not found him. Yet you know him, m'sieur—he is a friend of yours. How, then, are we poor policemen, who have only these words to go on, to find him?"

I had to admit the truth of the official's arguments and went away thoroughly dispirited. I tried to tell myself I was exaggerating the dangers, that nothing was likely to happen, that Gougaloff was so clumsy he must betray himself, even if he tried to shoot himself. It was no good. Even Grenant could not see the position as I saw it. But then he had not looked into Vardarma's eyes; he had not seen Gougaloff lurch from the room like a man reduced to a mere bundle of nerves and muscles, meekly obedient to another's will that had mysteriously supplanted his own.

Chapter 33

THE SEARCH

GRENANT AND I did not abandon the search until past three the next morning. We explored parts of Paris where neither of us had ever been before; we combed the bars, the night-clubs and the restaurants; and we returned at intervals to the police office to see if there was any news. It was all in vain, and when we

parted, red-eyed with weariness, we agreed to meet the same morning at nine.

"I don't see it's much use," grumbled Grenouille. "If we haven't found him now, we shan't. Besides, whatever it is that's going to happen is due at eleven."

"We shall have two hours," I replied. "In those two hours our luck may turn."

"I hope you may be right," he said as he moved off. Poor Grenouille! I don't think he had had so much physical exercise in his life before. He crawled off as though he barely knew how to raise his feet from the ground.

Yet he was there, waiting for me on his doorstep, when I presented myself at a couple of minutes before nine o'clock. He still looked tired, but he was spruce enough.

"I've been thinking, Borodin," he said, when I had greeted him. "Perhaps we've been looking too hard."

"Too hard?"

He nodded. "When I want to find anybody, I just go to some place that's popular and wait, and sure enough, after a while, the fellow is almost certain to turn up. It's happened again and again. But if I go out and start *looking* for him, I just waste my time and shoe-leather and get tired. Let's try it."

"I don't think it would work, Grenouille," I replied. "The people you wait for have known habits. If you want me, you probably go to Chez Georges and so on. The point is that we don't know where Gougaloff is likely to be."

"Perhaps not. But all the same it works."

The day started with the shadow of a clue. At one of the cafés a man had come in to eat breakfast soon after seven. The waiter had been new to the place, but he had described the customer to the proprietor, who knew Gougaloff well, and who thought the man might be he. Which way did he go? we asked. The waiter pointed down the street. I dropped him a coin. There was not much to go on, but it was better than nothing.

If it had been Gougaloff, he had more than two hours' start. We made inquiries where we could. One man had known

Gougoloff for four years. He said that he had caught a glimpse of him going into the Metro.

Grenant and I looked blankly at each other.

"We may as well give it up," he said dismally.

"I'm beginning to think you're right," I replied. "We've been assuming that whatever is going to happen must be in Paris. But it need not be. He may be on his way there now—he may have arrived—and we have no means of finding out."

"That's true."

"We should have got up earlier," I added gloomily.

Grenant said nothing.

For all our disappointment and hopelessness, we continued to wander about. But we had frequent halts for refreshment. Grenant said he could not go on without it, and I was getting in the mood in which I was inclined to agree with him.

We had got as far as the Gare du Nord and had had a bad time at the hands of the dense crowd who had gathered there. The place was packed with sightseers and flags decked the streets. We looked about us in amazement and asked the reason for all this from a man in the waiting throng. He looked askance at our ignorance.

"Monsieur Paul Doumer, our President, is coming to open the Exhibition," he replied. "Haven't you heard about it? We are waiting to see him as he leaves the station."

My eye turned to a large clock. "It's just on eleven, Grenouille. No one can say we haven't done our best."

By some chance we had planted ourselves in the very front row of the crowd of sightseers. The train was in the station, and we could see a brave show of silk hats and much ceremonial handshaking and a broad expanse of red carpet. A band played somewhere, and everyone stood at attention.

Then the President appeared. He was a handsome man, tall, broad-shouldered and bearded. I took a casual glance at him, and then I stared. I had always thought Vardarma was unique, that he was some freak of nature. But this President might have been Vardarma's brother. He had the same presence, the same magnificent physique, and I should imagine the same conceit for himself. Of course, I had seen his pictures

in the papers on many occasions, but somehow the likeness had not registered as it did now I saw Doumer in the flesh.

I looked at Grenant. Grenant had seen it, too. His mouth was agape, and the pendulous cigarette had rolled from the lower lip into the gutter.

Slowly the procession drew nearer. The President was bowing and smiling in response to the cheers as he made his way to the waiting cars.

And then it happened. One minute there were only cheering crowds, a smiling President, a group of obsequious officials, the next the cheers had died away, and the air echoed with the sound of three shots. On the ground lay a figure quite still, a figure that had once been the President of France and was now being shielded from view by a screen of police. A little way off was a struggling crowd. I could see fists raised and brought down. There were cries. And then a police van came up and a man was bundled towards it in the grip of at least a dozen policemen.

I stared, as everyone else stared; but I did not need to see. I knew what the face would be when I saw it. I had known the moment I looked on the President's face and heard the shots.

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Grenant, crossing himself; it was the first and only time I had seen him do it. "*C'est le pauvre Gougaloff.*"

Chapter 34

A MURDER

OF COURSE it was Gougaloff. It made a very fine to-do. There were national complications; there were inquiries and commissions. And while these extraordinary measures were being taken, the routine of the courts went on undisturbed. Gougaloff appeared before the examining magistrate. He went for his trial. A well-wisher provided him with the finest legal defence money could obtain. But Gougaloff would say little.

"It was a gesture," he said, in answer to all questions. "It had to be done."

"A gesture of what? A gesture for what?" he was asked.

Gougoloff merely replied that it was a gesture.

The defence pleaded insanity, and I was dragged in to support it. The police admitted I had warned them. I could tell them nothing. Gougoloff had been acting strangely. He had insulted a friend of mine and threatened him. That was all I knew, and I had done all I could to trace him and put him under restraint. I was complimented for my efforts, but they did not help Gougoloff.

A President of France had died. The complications both inside and outside the country were considerable. Someone had to suffer.

Gougoloff was sent to the guillotine.

I went to his trial. In some ways he was the calmest figure in court. He took no notice of anyone or anything, but sat there, his face wreathed in that serene smile that I had seen that day when Vardarma had almost battered him to death.

The trial was in the best French tradition. It had to be, in view of its importance. Counsel argued and gesticulated; they flew into tempers; the Court was adjourned till peace was restored. Above it all, setting an example to judge, to jury, to the *maîtres*, in their gowns, sat Gougoloff, the man who had killed a President for a gesture.

They decided he was not insane.

I thought of the court. I thought of the quibbling lawyers. Perhaps it was right after all. . . .

But a lot happened between the crime and the trial. As soon as we had seen Gougoloff carried away, we fled from the spot.

"Vardarma is right," Grenant puffed, exhausted with running. "He will die for this."

"I am going to see Vardarma," I said.

"You are mad. He will kill you."

"I don't mind that. I'm going to see him."

"Then I'm coming with you."

It couldn't have taken us five minutes to reach Vardarma's house. I rushed straight to his study. He was sitting behind his desk, smiling blandly. I had seen that smile before, when I had heard his first lecture on his cure.

"You have come to bring me news, messieurs," he said politely. "There is no need, though I appreciate your thoughtfulness. Gougaloff has done it."

"How did you know?" I demanded.

Vardarma shrugged. "Let us say that his mind was my mind for the time being. I am entitled to know what my mind is doing."

"I believe he thought he was killing you."

"Perhaps he did. People have been kind enough to tell me that I strongly resembled M. le President. I am not responsible for the thoughts of our friend Gougaloff."

"But you are for his actions," I insisted.

"Not at all. He has done nothing, but he will suffer for it. Do not try my patience, my friend Borodin. I am responsible for my own actions, and what Gougaloff has done is one of my actions."

"It's diabolical."

"Thank you for the compliment." He rose. "I am glad you came. It has rounded everything off nicely, and I can say good-bye to you. Forget me. Perhaps Vardarma and all his works were just a dream. Think so if you wish. You have amused me, gentlemen, you and your knowing old professors. You are such children, such fools. And now I am going."

"Where?"

"Does that matter? Please don't try to follow me. It might not be safe. Adieu, gentlemen, adieu."

He strode out of the room. Despite his warning we rushed down the stairs; but only in time to see his car, loaded with luggage, drive off.

Vardarma was gone—I knew not where. I felt then that I would never see him again, but I was certain that he would always be part of my memory that would never fade. A memory with the haunting quality of a nightmare, so that I could never say whether it was real.

Chapter 35

THE GUILLOTINE

I saw Gougloff once more before the shining blade fell on his neck. I managed to get permission to visit him in his cell. He was calm and seemed happy in a quiet way. He talked rationally of all manner of things, but he never mentioned Vardarma. At last I came to the real point of my visit.

"What about the formula?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"But you must tell me. Think of humanity. Think of the future. Think of the suffering millions . . ."

"Why should I?" he asked simply. Then he added in a quieter voice: "Perhaps I am thinking of them, Borodin. That cure is tainted. It came from the devil and it must go back to the devil. Good cannot come of evil. I have said something like this before, and I say it again, because I know it to be true. You can torture me, as the police tortured me, but I shall not tell you. Let it die with me."

My time was up. I had to go. As I turned to the door, he added:

"It is a death cure, Borodin—a death cure. It brings nothing but death to those who touch it."

Chapter 36

MALNA'S FAREWELL

THEY GUILLOTINED Gougloff on a Wednesday. They tell me he kept his serene courage to the last; and with his passing this story ends. But for one thing.

He died, I say, on a Wednesday. On the Saturday I received a letter with a Swiss postmark. The writing was unfamiliar, but I had an intuition that I knew the writer. I was right. As I unfolded the sheet, the single sheet to which the scent of mimosa clung, I caught sight of the signature.

"Malna."

My hands trembled as I read and—let me confess it—my eyes dimmed with tears. It was a little while before the letters formed themselves into recognizable words. It was quite short:

"You are lucky to be alive. It might so easily have been you who perished on the scaffold. I sold myself for your life. I promised I would never see you again, because you were dangerous, because you had it in you to rouse the good in me and, strangely, in father. I am bond-slave now to evil for ever. But I loved you. Malna."

Somewhere, sometime, you may read this, Malna. Let the world know it. I loved you, too, and evil or good, you still call to me across the world.

EPILOGUE

"AND NOW," said Borodin, "as you introduced the story, you must ring down the curtain."

I perform the task of writing the Epilogue more gladly than the Prologue because what I have to say really rounds off the story. However, let me begin as before by explaining how, by strange coincidence or coincidences, I came to take part in the drama that began to unfold some years ago in Paris, and on which the final curtain descended in a squalid room in London.

Life seems to move in a strange way. Fatalists think that their life is mapped out on the day of their birth, others suggest that the life-line is traced by themselves and that they hold their own destiny in their hands. For me, personally, life has always followed the strangest course imaginable. Things that I would like to have avoided seem to crop up again and return in one form or another to take their place in my daily life. The Vardarma incident is a typical case in point.

Some months back, a man whom I had met several times professionally came to me and asked me to do him a favour. Would I mind, he said, examining a patient of his, a very poor patient, and would I be good enough to see the patient for

nothing? I did so, for friendship's sake, although I do not practise much in the ordinary way. I have dedicated my time to medical research, so naturally patients come to me only by special recommendation or at a friend's request. Fortunately research has not blunted my sense of diagnosis. I could see an operation was needed, so I persuaded the man to let me call in another surgeon friend of mine.

The operation was performed—a comparatively simple one on the bile ducts; but what the surgeon found was not so simple. Briefly, the patient had cancer—and at a stage that seemed beyond hope.

Naturally it was terrible news to break to the man himself, and what amazed me was his reluctance to believe it. I saw in his eyes a mistrust or mockery, as if he thought my friend and I were alarmist fools. And when the man apparently became his normal self and continued so for weeks, his belief in our ineptitude was confirmed. The patient rang me up to tell me I ought to be ashamed of myself for trying to torture him with groundless suspicions. After all, he never believed in medical men, he concluded, because he was one himself—his name was Dr. Vardarma—but, of course, that would not mean anything to me, as his fame had been founded mostly on his work abroad.

Dr. Vardarma! Only then did I realize that I had not inquired the name of the patient when I saw him first. As I said, I examined him because of the insistence of my colleague and friend, and, being absent-minded, as all scientists are, it never occurred to me that the proper thing would have been to ask his name. What a foolish omission! Had I done so, it certainly would have brought to my mind at once the tragedy which George Borodin had told me, a tragedy in which Dr. Vardarma and his daughter played such a prominent part.

To put it briefly, the man paraded for years in Paris and other capitals of Europe as the discoverer of the cure for cancer. He boasted of having to his credit scores of cured patients who previously had been declared inoperable or incurable by the orthodox men of medical science.

Now I understood why he so mockingly accepted our diagnosis of his being a sufferer from cancer. It seemed well-

nigh impossible that he, who had found the cure, would allow himself to become a victim of the dreaded disease.

Well, Vardarma or no Vardarma, the inevitable had happened. The disease which had baffled hundreds of scientists refused to submit itself to his ministrations and our diagnosis proved to be right after all.

The doctor suddenly grew worse, and when I was asked, at his express request to see him again, even I could see the case was beyond human aid. My surgeon friend agreed with me, but we did all that was in our power to bring him relief. We gave him radium and X-ray treatment. My friend tried to operate again, but the case was beyond even his skill.

Together we told Dr. Vardarma. After all, he was a doctor himself, and although he looked grave, he was still a little sceptical.

Yes, he saw now that we were right; that he was suffering from cancer. But he was going to treat himself with the same medicine with which he had saved so many lives. We shrugged our shoulders. That was the last I had seen of the stricken man.

Time went on, and then George Borodin brought me the manuscript of his book. I passed quickly over my own effort at the beginning—a clumsy prologue which reminded me of one of those unhappy acts that come on first in the music hall to quieten the audience before the real show—and became absorbed in the story itself. So far as I myself am concerned, he has reported our meetings and my part in the affair with commendable accuracy. It is odd to be a character in a book and to have one's own words before one in print; but in it I and they are black and white, and I have to accept the picture as a mirror held to truth.

So much of what I read was new to me. Yet it was not entirely new, in that it had an air of familiarity. I started to think. Of course I knew this Dr. Vardarma! I had seen him some few months ago. The whole scene of that last meeting, filled with tragedy, flared before my eyes.

My first impulse was to run to Borodin, tell him of the incident of the dying doctor, and lead him to his bedside. But I changed my mind. I was sure that Vardarma would not wish

Borodin to see him, an ill and broken man, dying in the squalor of his mean little room. It would be kinder, I thought, to draw a curtain over the whole thing—Borodin's book was written and now the incident of Vardarma and Malna had been relegated to the past.

But, as I remarked earlier in this epilogue, life moves in a strange way, and things I would like to forget have an uncomfortable habit of cropping up again.

Some little while after I had read Borodin's finished manuscript, Dr. Vardarma telephoned me again. His faint voice came through the wire, a voice hardly audible. Obviously the man was in great agony. He wanted to see me at once. His voice was absent of mockery or scepticism; it sounded like the voice of a man from whom all hope had departed.

I asked him whether he wanted me in person. Wouldn't it be better for him to call his medical attendant or a surgeon? After all, I was a scientist. No, he did not want anyone else—he wanted me, John Charton, the friend of George Borodin. The last sentence staggered me. I had never mentioned to him that I knew George Borodin, or that I had any knowledge of his life's story. But somehow the man knew, and he also knew that Borodin was in London, and pleaded with me to bring him along.

"Please hurry," was the last I heard on the telephone.

I drove hurriedly to Borodin's house, told him briefly of the conversation, and together we drove to the sick man. Borodin's face was set as we raced through the streets, and I knew his feelings must have been very mixed as he went to see the man who had played such an important role during one phase of his life.

We felt the moment we entered the dimly-lit room that there was already the oppressive atmosphere of approaching death, which was in fitting harmony with the squalid poverty, dirt and disorder surrounding the man.

Vardarma recognized Borodin at once, but I could see that he himself was shocked at the terrible havoc caused by disease on the once fine-looking doctor. Without ceremony we sat by his bed, Borodin taking his hand and shaking it in encouragement.

There seemed to be some bond between the two which overcame the terrible happenings of the past and Borodin's knowledge of the man's true character.

Vardarma was dying. In his left hand was a bundle of badly scrawled manuscript. We both wanted to say a few friendly words; words of hope which a dying man likes to hear, even if he does not believe them. But he stopped us with a slight motion of his head.

"Please do not interrupt me. There is nothing you can say, my dear Borodin, that can alleviate my suffering or prolong my end. I wanted you here because I know I have very few minutes to live and I felt I must speak to you. . . . I know you will understand, for you loved her too, didn't you?"

Borodin nodded, speechlessly, and again I had the impression that here were two men who shared something, had a common bond—the dying, racked figure on the dirty bed, and the young surgeon who was fast building his career. I felt like a spectator at the last act of a stage performance, but sat quietly and still, completely absorbed in the drama that was being played out before my eyes.

"Please believe that Malna had nothing to do with my crime—I alone was responsible. Everything I did was for her happiness, only I took the wrong way which, instead of bringing happiness, spread misery and death around us and among people we knew and loved."

He turned to me.

"You met my daughter in Algiers in circumstances you know well, and which I need not repeat. One thing you don't know, and that is, my daughter did not take part in the killing of my collaborator—the German doctor. I killed him because I wanted his formula for the cure of cancer. I thought I would not only bring help to suffering humanity, but also make a great name for myself. I had hoped to bring happiness and wealth to my daughter. But when I saw young men courting her, when I thought I was on the point of losing her affection for ever I became jealous. I was terrified at the idea of her marrying anybody, so in my eagerness to keep her for myself I ruined everybody who fell in love with her."

His voice trailed off weakly; Borodin and I bent over him anxiously, knowing what a strain this conversation was putting upon him.

"No, no, I can go on. I have such a short time, and there is still much to be said. You know, George, the only man I was not jealous of was you. At one time I hoped you would marry Malna. But I soon realized that you would never forgive me if you knew about the crime I had committed. Your sense of justice would have compelled you to denounce me. For a moment I thought of getting rid of you in the same way as I had got rid of the other Russian doctor, but an additional crime was too much even for me. I knew that I was a finished man after my assistant was guillotined for the murder of the President. Ever since that day I have never found a moment's peace. I sent Malna away to Switzerland and gave her everything I possessed. She doesn't know now where I am, because she never forgave me when she found out that I was responsible for the death of two men. So instead of keeping the love of the only creature that mattered in my life, I have had nothing but hatred, justifiable hatred."

"One last request." By this time his voice was hardly audible. "Here is the entire manuscript on my treatment for cancer. That is my compensation to you for all the suffering I caused you so long ago, and my gratitude to you, Charton, for your kindness during my illness. Read it, both of you, and if you think there is something really worthwhile in it you have my permission to continue the experiments. And remember, George, I was a good friend to you and I desired nothing but your happiness and success in life."

Dr. Vardarma died in the early hours of the morning. Borodin and I did all we could to comfort his last hours, and we are both happy to know that he died feeling better for having unburdened himself of his terrible past and knowing that George forgave him at the end.

We walked from the house in the cool early morning air, and without a word we turned towards the nearby park. After the hours we had spent in that horrible room of death we both needed the clean fresh air.

"So that ends the story of Vardarma," I said at last. "He died a broken and lonely man, without a soul to care for him and with his only daughter hating him. May he find peace in the other world to which he has gone."

Borodin was silent for a while, his thoughts far away. "And my hope is that Malna may read the story of her father's life one day and might be prompted to forgive him too."

Then the scientist in me made me ask: "What shall we do about the manuscript—about the cancer cure?"

Borodin turned to me gravely. "I left it there with him—let it be burned, or let it be buried with him. I shall always remember the last words Gougaloff spoke to me—'It is a death cure, Borodin—a death cure. It brings nothing but death to those who touch it.'"

JOHN CHARTON

